

Writer's methods: form, structure and language



Target your learning

- How does Williams develop his themes, settings and characters as the dramatic action unfolds? (A01)
- What dramatic methods does Williams use to shape the audience's responses at crucial points in the play? (A02)

This section is designed to offer you information about the form, structure and language of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in order to help you approach A02, the Assessment Objective which requires you to analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts. In the next few pages each aspect of Williams' craft is covered separately in order to clarify the differences between them, but it is important to remember that these different strands frequently overlap and interact. Therefore this section begins with a discussion of the playwright's signature personal theory of 'plastic theatre' as a way of unifying any discussion of form, structure and language.

Putting it all together: 'plastic theatre'

In his production notes for his first major stage success *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), Williams discussed the need to create an overarching, holistic, organic theatrical experience to challenge what he saw as the limitations of conventional, realist theatre. For Williams, drama had to do more than merely reproduce 'reality'; he wanted to explore the ways in which theatrical performances could tap into a wider definition of the 'truth'. In a sense, knowing that his plays were about unconventional characters and themes, Williams rightly saw that they needed equally unconventional stage effects: his 'new, plastic theatre', he hoped, would then 'take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions':

Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth. When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn't be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are. The straight realistic play with its genuine Frigidaire and authentic ice-cubes, its characters who speak exactly as its audience speaks, corresponds to the academic landscape and has the same virtue of a photographic likeness. Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance.

Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, 1944

For Williams, a play had to do more than merely reflect life as it was: it should try to express some universal insight into the human condition. His modes of dramatic expression are thus many, varied and complex and his concept of 'plastic theatre' places as much value on non-literary and non-verbal elements of drama, such as sound, lighting, movement, setting and design, as it does on dialogue in terms of their ability to convey theme and character. Thus the following section will draw attention to many of the non-naturalistic aspects of his work, such as his metaphorical scene descriptions, symbolic use of setting, props, music, sound and lighting, and patterned and poetic dialogue, because Williams saw all these elements as forming part of an organic and overarching dramatic experience. In fact, given his commitment to what might be seen as a kind of total or extreme theatre, worrying about whether to categorise, say, 'imagery' under the heading of form, structure or language completely misses the point. It is far better to think in terms of Williams' own notion of 'plastic theatre', and celebrate the fact that he hit upon a vivid, ambitious and pretty much all-encompassing view of the possibilities of the dramatic medium.

Many aspects of Williams' dramatic method are explored in other sections of this book, particularly the *Scene summaries and commentaries* on pages 3–20 of this guide.

Build critical skills

Expressionism is characterised by a replacement of objectivity and realism with a more subjective picture of the world. To express heightened states of emotion or intense personal experiences, ideas and emotions are presented in deliberately warped, artificial and/or unnatural ways. Expressionist drama often portrays the ongoing suffering and epiphanies of the protagonist episodically and sometimes uses bizarrely stylised or heightened speech styles. Locate and analyse examples of the expressionist features within *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Form

The essence of a theatrical performance lies in its ephemeral nature, whereas the written text from which it springs is fixed and permanent. When you write about the form, structure and language of a play you must show a keen awareness of the ways in which the dramatic genre works and the specifically theatrical methods used by playwrights to present their ideas. If you remember that the printed version of *Streetcar* is above all a blueprint for performance, and that the play was written to be seen and heard in the company of others rather than read alone, you are on the right track. Unlike a novel or a poem, a play is not complete in its purely written form: it has to make the transition from page to stage. A theatre audience shares the same physical space as the actors

performing; we are separate from the onstage action but eyewitnesses to it in real time and real space. Thus when we read rather than watch *Streetcar*, we are receiving the text in an incomplete, yet extremely rich and rewarding form. If you look at a play written by Shakespeare or one of his contemporaries you will notice a striking lack of detailed stage directions, probably because the playwright himself was available to have some input into the staging of his own work. In the centuries since then, other playwrights have used brief stage directions to tell the actors how to behave, to whom they should direct their speech, or what tone of voice to adopt, but in many twentieth-century plays, including those of Williams, the stage directions go way beyond such practical and functional details. Indeed, Williams' precise, rich and often lyrical stage directions are often so thought-provoking that they offer an additional level of enjoyment to the reader which is unavailable to a theatre audience. One of the most characteristic elements of Williams' dramaturgy is the fact that while his characters are presented extremely realistically, his staging is often startlingly non-naturalistic. Part of *Streetcar's* power stems from watching his penetratingly observed and psychologically convincing characters use heightened and heavily patterned dialogue rich with linguistic motifs as they interact within a consciously stylised onstage world teeming with unusual and symbolic visual and sound effects.

In terms of genre or form, one of the most interesting aspects of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is the various ways in which we might choose to categorise it as, for instance, a twentieth-century American tragedy, a melodrama, or what Williams himself described as a 'memory play'. Generic categories, however, are not fixed but in a constant state of flux. As an active reader, you should aim to locate a range of interesting questions that lurk in the gaps between the apparently overlapping and occasionally contradictory dramatic sub-genres mentioned in this section. One of the most exciting aspects of *Streetcar* is the way in which it seems simultaneously polemical, political, poetic and romantic. In the end, perhaps Williams' artful blurring of literary genres allows us to see how a great writer can be startlingly innovative and original while still conforming to many traditional theatrical practices and conventions.

Twentieth-century American tragedy

Tragedy is the art form created to confront the most difficult experiences we face: death, loss, injustice, thwarted passion, despair.

Wallace in McEvoy, 2009

According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, writing around 330bc, 'the structure of the best tragedy should be not simple but complex and one that represents incidents arousing fear and pity – for that is peculiar to this form of art'. In essence, a tragedy involves the downfall of a great man (the tragic hero) as the result of a reversal (*peripeteia*) which is the inevitable result of his own actions and involves the concept of *hamartia*, which is usually taken

to mean a fatal character flaw. At the play's denouement, the tragic hero gains some insight (*anagnorisis*) into the nature of the human condition, fate or destiny and the will of the gods, while the onlookers are moved to feel pity and terror at what they have seen, thereby achieving a kind of spiritual cleansing in the process (*catharsis*). From the very beginning, it seems, the audience has always been as much a part of the tragic experience as the actors.

In his *Memoirs*, published about 30 years after he had written *Streetcar*, Williams declared:

I realise how very old-fashioned I am as a dramatist to be so concerned with classic form but this does not embarrass me, since I feel that the absence of form is nearly always, if not always, as dissatisfying to an audience as it is to me. I persist in considering 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof' my best work of the long plays because of its classical unities of time and place and the tingly magnitude of Big Daddy. Yet I seem to contradict myself. I write so often of people with no magnitude, at least on the surface. I write of 'little people'. But are there 'little people'? I sometimes think there are only little conceptions of people. Whatever is living and feeling with intensity is not little and, examined in depth, it would seem to me that most 'little people' are living with that intensity that I can use as a writer. Was Blanche a 'little person'? Certainly not. She was a demonic creature, the size of her feeling was too great for her to contain without madness.

Williams, *Memoirs*, 1976

Tragicomedy, melodrama and soap opera

The one American playwright who is a conspicuous exception to the dichotomy between high and low culture is Tennessee Williams. Williams' South, with its sexual ambivalence, self-delusion, and irrational violence, has become part of our popular myths, the ambience of countless B-movies and television melodramas. Surely, no play of the American theatre, perhaps no play in English since the time of Shakespeare, has won such praise from both the critics and the populace.

Kolin in R. C. Small, *A Teacher's Guide to the Signet edition of Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire*, 2004

As Kolin suggests here, several of Williams' plays have specific qualities which would seem to belong to the 'lowbrow' popular culture genres of melodrama and soap opera rather than the 'highbrow' elite genre of classical tragedy. Melodramas contain sensational incidents, stereotyped characters, exaggerated emotions and simplistic sentiments, whereas soap operas are often intimate, domestic, family-orientated and theoretically realistic. Relatively few texts share common ground with both *Oedipus the King* and *Game of Thrones*, but several of Williams' key themes – family and sexual politics, greed and betrayal, love and

TASK

While it is perhaps easier to see Blanche as the tragic protagonist of the play, some readers and audiences might prefer to view Stanley as the hero, and in the earlier scenes he does seem more likeable than Blanche. Where do you stand on this key issue, and what textual evidence would you use to support your point of view?

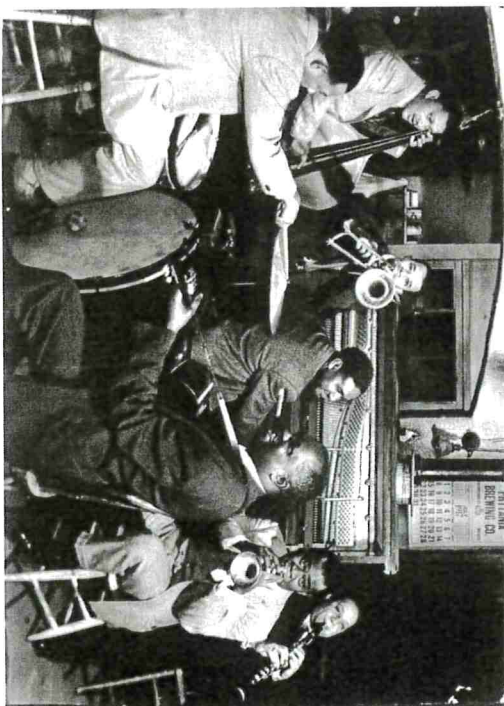
hate, loneliness and death – tap into the perennial concerns important to the audiences who first watched the ancient Greek plays and modern soap addicts alike. Like many of Williams' most memorable characters, Blanche is wrestling with the eternal questions that tortured Oedipus then and now obsess the Starks and the Lanisters. Who are we? How can we find love? What are we here for?

In another of his great plays, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), Williams blended tragic elements such as the haunting suicide of a tormented homosexual and the terminal cancer of the family patriarch Big Daddy with the comically misplaced belief of his sycophantic and super-fertile daughter-in-law Mae that her gruesome squadron of squabbling brats will net her the family fortune. Similarly, in *Streetcar*, Williams juxtaposes diametrically opposed tragic and comic moods in dramatising rape and insanity alongside the domestic squabbling of Blanche and Stanley over her hogging the bathroom and secretly guzzling his whisky. Managing this tragicomic emotional tightrope poses a considerable challenge for actors and audiences alike, yet Williams' skill as a dramatist ensures that the play never descends into cliché or farce as it looks at life in the raw, with all its contradictions and irreconcilabilities.

Social realist drama

The success of *Streetcar* may have been partly due to the new taste for realism that emerged in post-war America: Stanley and Mitch were fellow soldiers and Blanche slept with many young men from the army base near her home in Laurel. Another realistic aspect of the play is its depiction of the rich cultural and racial background of life in working-class New Orleans. At the denouement, virtually all the characters are on stage, from Blanche and Stella with their aristocratic French ancestry to Polish Stanley, Anglo-Irish Mitch, Mexican Pablo and Steve, whose surname, 'Hubbel', suggests he is of German descent. We have also seen the Mexican Woman and the Negro Woman and heard the black musicians playing their jazz and blues.

Streetcar is set just after the seismic upheaval of World War II, and Williams dramatises a remarkable post-war transformation of America in which the economic contribution of men like Stanley will underpin the dawning of a new age of prosperity. The family unit had been split up and threatened during the war years, but afterwards it was seen as the cornerstone of the nation's recovery. Thus popular culture seemed to endorse traditional gender roles by celebrating the domestic responsibilities of women as homemakers and child carers and closing down the alternative possibilities for women which the war had temporarily offered in the absence of men.



▲ Jazz and blues would have provided a vivid soundtrack to life in New Orleans in the 1940s

Morality play

In medieval times, morality plays were didactic texts designed to convey a moral lesson; the characters were allegorical archetypes personifying virtues and vices such as 'Mercy' and 'Greed' in a very schematic manner, with the central theme being mankind's struggle against sin. This explicitly Christian form of theatre was meant to teach the audience about abstract concepts such as virtue, vice and repentance.

Context

The 1946 film *The Best Years of Our Lives* is the story of a soldier, a sailor and an airman trying to readjust to civilian life: a huge critical and commercial success, it won seven Academy Awards. Watch a clip on the internet to get a sense of the challenge to readjust which faced army veterans like Stanley and Mitch after the end of World War II.

Clearly there is plenty of sinning in *Streetcar* – in fact, all the so-called seven deadly sins are represented: wrath, avarice, sloth, pride, lust, envy and gluttony. Yet while punishment is meted out to some (but not all) transgressors, Williams avoids spelling out too schematic a moral message, leaving the moral judgements to his readers and audiences.

TASK

In order to think more deeply about aspects of form and genre, collect evidence of characters committing each of the seven deadly sins in the play. How far do you think it is useful to set a modern play such as *Streetcar* within the framework of a stereotyped medieval drama?

Memory play

After World War II, partly influenced by the ideas of psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, the idea of the 'memory play' began to influence a new generation of writers. Williams saw all his major works as 'memory plays' that centre on a character undergoing an intense psychological crisis; this incident is so profound it triggers a time-loop trap during which the trauma must be continuously relived until the character comes to terms with it. Thus the action of the play is non-linear and consciously artificial, with stylised dramatic techniques being used to suggest a psychological or spiritual 'truth' about the inner life of the main protagonist.

Memory plays seek to convey a symbolic truth as opposed to a naturalistic imitation of reality, and it is fascinating to trace those elements of *Streetcar* which seem to conflict with the notion of a 'realistic' text: Williams' use of the Varsouviana to move Blanche in and out of her memories of the past, for instance, adds immeasurably to the audience's understanding of her character even though it is completely artificial. Unlike the other characters on stage, the audience can hear the music that conjures up her remembered experience; in effect Williams has organised the structural framing in which Blanche's memory of Allan's suicide is embedded to minimise our chances of achieving an objective critical stance and encourage us to empathise with her instead. Thus there are effectively two different types of 'reality' operating here, defined by Felicia Hardison Londré as 'the mingling of objective reality and the subjective reality that is seen through the eyes of Blanche Dubois' (Londré in Roudané, 1997). According to Smith-Howard and Heintzelman (2005), the 1947 Broadway production of *Streetcar* created a new genre in the modern theatre: a heightened essentialism that allows dreams (or nightmares) to coexist with reality.

Taking it further

Like *Streetcar*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) uses memories to structure the text in a non-linear way. Miller famously challenges the notion that tragedy must focus upon the downfall of a great man: the hero, Willy Loman, is an ordinary 'low' man. Read *Death of a Salesman* and compare and contrast the ways in which Williams and Miller use memory to emphasise their major themes.

Structure

When we talk about the structure of a play, we mean the manner in which it is put together. At A-level you need to understand the ways in which the structural methods used by the writer contribute to and influence our understanding of the text as a whole.

The structure of *Streetcar* is reminiscent of the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov's famous tragicomedy *The Cherry Orchard* (1903). Both plays deal with

the annihilation of a genteel rural aristocratic way of life by a rising and brashly confident lower class, and begin with an arrival and end with a departure. Moreover, like Chekhov, Williams often uses music and sound effects to heighten dramatic tension.

The arrival of the intruder

Like so many plays, *Streetcar* utilises elements of the classical dramatic structure of crisis and climax. The bare bones of the piece fit numerous other plays in which the on-stage action is set in motion by the arrival of an intruder who invades and disrupts an apparently stable and harmonious world before being expelled, whereupon harmony is (more or less) re-established.

The 11 'scenes'

Unlike most plays, which are divided into acts and scenes, Williams chose to structure *A Streetcar Named Desire* into 11 scenes which trace the development of the relationships between Blanche, Stanley and Stella over a few months. The original stage production placed the two intervals after Scene IV (the poker night) and Scene VII (Blanche's date with Mitch) and it has been suggested that this model effectively divides the play into three sections plus a coda, like this:

- ▶ **Scenes I–IV**, set in early May, establish a mood of dark comedy.
- ▶ **Scenes V and VI**, set on a swelteringly hot August evening, are melancholic, nostalgic and romantic.
- ▶ **Scenes VII–X**, set on the afternoon and evening of Blanche's birthday, 15 September, are powerfully dramatic, climactic and tragic.
- ▶ **Scene XI**, set 'some weeks later', presumably in the early autumn, works as a kind of desolate tragic coda.

Movement in time

Whereas the onstage action keeps moving forward until Stanley rapes Blanche, we are also taken backwards in time to Blanche's primal sexual trauma, the discovery of Allan's homosexuality and his subsequent suicide. When Blanche finally describes this event to Mitch, years after it took place, it has entirely changed its 'meaning': at the time she was shocked, appalled and disgusted, but now she feels guilt, sorrow and remorse. Significantly the play begins in the spring and ends in the 'fall'.

Dramatic climaxes

Another notable structural feature is Williams' decision to end each of the 11 scenes with a vivid punchline, startling tableau or arresting visual image. Note the patterned and repetitive nature of these startlingly dramatic closing moments:

- ▶ **Scene I** — Blanche sinks down, puts her head in her hands and announces she is going to be sick.

Build critical skills

According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, the three classical unities (rules for drama) are unity of action: a play should track one main plot, with no (or few) subplots; unity of place: the action should take place in one location; and unity of time: the action should take place within a single day. Analyse the ways in which Williams breaks all these 'rules' and comment on what he has gained by doing so.

- ▶ **Scene II** – Blanche asks: 'Which way do we – go now – Stella? ... The blind are – leading the blind!' (pages 23–24). The 'blue piano' and the 'hot trumpet' are heard.
 - ▶ **Scene III** – Mitch comforts Blanche who declares: 'Thank you for being so kind! I need kindness now' (page 34).
 - ▶ **Scene IV** – Stella embraces Stanley as he grins at Blanche in triumph; the 'blue piano', trumpet and drums are heard.
 - ▶ **Scene V** – Blanche kisses the Young Man and gets rid of him only just in time for Mitch's arrival, whereupon she launches into her Southern belle act to dazzle him.
 - ▶ **Scene VI** – Blanche and Mitch embrace at the end of their date and Blanche declares: 'Sometimes – there's God – so quickly!' (page 57).
 - ▶ **Scene VII** – Blanche realises something has gone badly wrong and when Stella denies anything has happened she shouts: 'You're lying! Something has!' As she and Stella freeze, 'The distant piano goes into a hectic breakdown' (page 63).
 - ▶ **Scene VIII** – Stella goes into labour and as the Varsouviana plays, Blanche sings the Mexican folk-song 'Ei pan de mais'.
 - ▶ **Scene IX** – After Mitch attempts to rape her, Blanche screams: 'Fire! Fire! Fire!' and falls to her knees. 'The distant piano is slow and blue' (page 75).
 - ▶ **Scene X** – Stanley attacks Blanche, declaring: '**We've had this date with each other from the beginning!**' She sinks to her knees. He picks up her inert figure and carries her to the bed. The hot trumpet and drums from the Four Deuces sound loudly' (page 81).
 - ▶ **Scene XI** – Stella weeps in Stanley's arms and as her 'luxurious sobbing' and his 'sensual murmur' fade the 'blue piano' and the 'muted trumpet' are heard as Steve announces: 'This game is seven-card stud' (page 90).
- Interestingly it is in Scene VI – which comes right at the heart of the play as the middle point of the 11 scenes – that Blanche tells Mitch about the suicide of Allan Grey, the defining event of her life. In terms of some of the key moments or events characteristic of classical tragedy, the **crisis** may be identified as Blanche's decision to reveal the truth about her past to Mitch (Scene X), the **climax** as her rape by Stanley (Scene X) and the **dénouement** her removal to the asylum (Scene XI). Above all, however, it is important to note that the episodic, impressionistic structure of the text allows Williams to reveal crucial snippets of information about Blanche's past scene by scene, thus heightening the dramatic tension. *Streetcar's* structure is thus much looser than that of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, which Williams felt was his most skilfully constructed play in observing the unites of time, place and action. The on-stage action of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* plays out in real time, as a highly dysfunctional family goes into meltdown, squabbling over a \$10 million fortune and 28,000 acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile'. (Refer back to page 34 for more detail on *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.)

Aspects of setting and staging

In purely theatrical terms, Williams' radical rethinking of how to use the stage space was seen as particularly innovative when the play was first performed. In allowing the audience to witness the events taking place both in the Kowalskis' small cramped flat and the pulsing urban jungle of the Vieux Carré outside, he juxtaposed the realistic and the symbolic in a way which came to be seen as one of his signature dramatic techniques. According to Thomas Adler:

Williams fully utilized the stylistic possibilities of the stage ... to break away from the language-bound realistic drama of the nineteenth century ... This new type of play would not only admit but insist that the language of drama involves more than just words; it would acknowledge the stage symbols and the scenic images that speak to the audience as powerfully as what issues from the mouths of the characters.

Adler in Small, 2004

In *Streetcar* the cramped flat is the arena for combat as Blanche and Stanley fight for physical space and emotional territory with all their associated connotations of invasion and defence, attraction and repulsion. Because Blanche has to sleep on a collapsible put-you-up camp bed it is suggested from the outset that she will be merely passing through Elysian Fields on her journey towards her final destination, Cemetery; meanwhile the fact that her sleeping quarters are only cordoned off by a flimsy curtain represents her ominous lack of security and protection when living under Stanley's roof.

Stage directions

Tennessee Williams was committed to a form of theatre that aimed to do something other than represent reality in as lifelike a way as possible; he wanted to combine as many of the stage arts as he could to create a theatrical experience greater than the sum of its parts. Thus we have in *Streetcar* theatrical stage directions that seem at once lyrical, symbolic, metaphorical and almost poetic. It is important to recognise the extent to which Williams was an experimental dramatist consciously trying out different styles. In order, he felt, to liberate a higher form of psychological truth than a faithful representation of 'real life'. The language of *Streetcar's* stage directions is an arresting and highly significant aspect of the text that often functions as an extended narrative commentary on key elements of theme and character. In Scene I, for example, Blanche's arrival in the Quarter is described like this:

Blanche comes around the corner, carrying a valise. She looks at a slip of paper, then at the building, then again at the slip and again at the building. Her expression is one of shocked disbelief. Her appearance is incongruous to this setting. She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl,

white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district. She is about five years older than Stella. Her delicate beauty must avoid a strong light. There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth.

It is possible to split up this lengthy passage into three distinct sections. In the first part, Williams provides what we might see as fairly typical stage directions that inform the actor playing the role of Blanche of specific gestures and movements – checking that she has the right address and looking startled when she realises that it is in fact correct. Next comes the part in which Williams describes Blanche's stage costume; here he presents her ladylike 'Southern Belle' outfit as symbolic of her outsider status; what might be perfect for a cocktail party in the upscale garden district is utterly wrong for the Quarter. The ironic symbolism of the white clothes, with their connotations of purity and innocence, will be picked up later when Blanche unpacks her trunk and declares 'Clothes are my passion'. Then in the final couple of lines Williams moves into a lyrical, almost dreamy description of her as a fluttering moth frightened of land of course fatally drawn to harsh bright light. While manifestly impossible to actually transfer onto the stage, nonetheless the last section provides a perfect character sketch for the actor and director.

Let's now turn to Williams' keynote description of Stanley at the end of Scene I. While this is not the first occasion on which the audience has seen him, it is deliberately placed directly before his first encounter with Blanche. Pairing and comparing these initial descriptions of the two main characters enables us to see how the playwright has positioned them as adversaries from the outset:

More laughter and shouts of parting come from the men. Stanley throws the screen door of the kitchen open and comes in. He is of medium height, about five feet eight or nine, and strongly, compactly built. Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitude. Since earliest manhood the centre of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens. Branching out from this complete and satisfying centre are all the auxiliary channels of his life, such as his heartiness with men, his appreciation of rough humour, his love of good drink and food and games, his car, his radio, everything that is his, that bears his emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer. He sizes up women at a glance, with sexual classifications, crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them.

Once again we see Williams' use of stage directions here to emphasise critical aspects of Stanley's typically 'alpha male' personality and motivation. He has an impressive physical presence and his confident – possibly arrogant – pleasure

in his ability to attract women is the cornerstone of his entire personality. His 'power and pride' provides a direct contrast with Blanche's 'uncertain manner' and the brilliantly coloured clothes he so enjoys wearing cohere with this early description of him as a peacock – surely the 'richly feathered male bird among hens' to which Williams is referring. Stanley is presented as materialistic through the listing of the desirable consumer commodities he owns and enjoys. The implication is that in addition to 'his car' and 'his radio', he cherishes his wife. Stella can surely be seen as his ultimate prized possession and linked with the phrase 'everything that is his', since the fact that she is pregnant with his child means that she literally 'bears his emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer'. The final sentence emphasises his dominating and threatening masculinity in terms which seem deliberately unsettling and menacing. Indeed Williams follows his depiction of Stanley 'sizing up women at a glance, with sexual classifications, crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them' with a stage direction that clearly suggests that Blanche picks up on this implicit sexual threat, 'drawing back involuntarily from his stare'.

The play's most iconic scene description comes at the beginning of Scene III, 'The Poker Night'. The striking stage directions here are classic Williams, demonstrating the key features of his signature flamboyance:

The Poker Night.

There is a picture of Van Gogh's of a billiard parlour at night. The kitchen now suggests that sort of lurid nocturnal brilliance, the raw colours of childhood's spectrum. Over the yellow linoleum of the kitchen table hangs an electric bulb with a vivid green glass shade. The poker players – Stanley, Steve, Mitch and Pablo – wear coloured shirts, solid blues, a purple, a red-and-white check, a light green, and they are men at the peak of their physical manhood, as coarse and direct and powerful as the primary colours. There are vivid slices of watermelon on the table, whisky bottles and glasses. The bedroom is relatively dim with only the light that spills between the portières and through the wide window on the street.

For a moment there is absorbed silence as a hand is dealt.

The startlingly rich and intense colour palette here – yellow, green, purple, blue and red – is a world away from Blanche's defining white, while the 'lurid nocturnal brilliance' and vivid rawness of the lighting bodes ill for a character who was explicitly likened to a 'moth' whose 'delicate beauty must avoid a strong light' in Scene I. Thus it is possible to see Williams' powerfully evocative stage directions arcing across from scene to scene to provide a sense of narrative continuity for the reader as well as very clear directions for the lighting and set designers working on a new stage production. In summary, Williams' 'idiosyncratic and instantly recognisable descriptive stage directions go well beyond' 'exit stage

left' to function as an omniscient narrative viewpoint very unusual in drama. This aspect of his stagecraft makes *Streetcar*, like most of his other plays, almost as rewarding to encounter as a reader as to experience in performance.

Taking it further

Tennessee Williams called an earlier draft of the play 'The Poker Night', which underlines the crucial significance of this scene. The stage directions refer to an 1888 painting by the Dutch Expressionist artist Vincent van Gogh called *The Night Café*. Have a look at this painting online.

Sound effects

As well as his beautiful and unusual scenic descriptions, Williams' use of sound is equally rich, symbolic and non-naturalistic. As well as realistic sound effects that signal the ongoing passage of everyday life – the loud rattling of a train passing across the railway tracks, for instance, or the water running for one of Blanche's endless baths, or the shrill piercing of a policeman's whistle – Williams uses artificial sound effects to enhance the atmosphere or heighten the audience's awareness of the psychological states of his characters. The key sound effects that feature in the play are the blue piano and the Varsouviana, two very different types of music that evoke both Blanche's new surroundings and her tragic past.



Two key sound effects feature in the play: the blue piano and the Varsouviana

Build critical skills

Analyse Williams' use of the blue piano throughout the play and trace the ways in which the music is used to build tension and/or heighten the audience's awareness of the characters' states of mind.

The blue piano

The blue piano is the sound of the Dixieland jazz emanating from the Four Deuces in the Vieux Carré. For Stanley, Stella, Steve and Eunice this local bar represents the vibrant, joyful, working-class culture of multicultural New Orleans: thus on one level this sound effect is naturalistic, because it conjures up the essence of everyday life. On another level, however, the distinctive bluesy jazz soundtrack seems to cohere with the ups and downs of the protagonists' lives in a highly symbolic and suggestive manner. For instance, when Blanche refuses to believe Stella's assurance that Mitch's failure to appear at her birthday tea is nothing to worry about, the stage directions are hugely significant: *'She stares fearfully at Stella, who pretends to be busy at the table. The distant piano goes into a hectic breakdown'*. The implication here must be that the music is fragmenting along with Blanche's hopes for a secure future with Mitch and echoing her imminent psychological collapse. Later, when Stanley assaults Blanche, his aggressively dominating physical actions are underscored and reinforced by the brassy jazz of the blue piano: *'He picks up her inert figure and carries her to the bed. The hot trumpet and drums from the Four Deuces sound loudly'*.

The Varsouviana

The Varsouviana polka music is the most famous stage effect in the play and can be seen as typical of Williams' flamboyant dramatic style. As a playwright determined to make use of the broadest possible range of dramatic techniques, he remained true to his conception of a distinctive 'plastic theatre' which would incorporate expressionist features to reflect the psychology of his characters, which is precisely what the Varsouviana does for Blanche. Unlike the 'blue piano' music which is designed to suggest the atmosphere of New Orleans while often also reflecting and enhancing elements of character or moments of rising dramatic tension, the Varsouviana is an artificial sound effect heard only in Blanche's imagination and by no other characters on stage.

The polka tune symbolises her husband's suicide, the tragic event which wrecked Blanche's life, hearing it sends her into an extreme state of panic and fear which only ends when she hears the climactic and terrible sound of a gunshot. Williams' use of the Varsouviana to move Blanche in and out of her memories of the past adds immeasurably to the audience's understanding of her character and is the key element of *Streetcar* which challenges the notion of a 'realistic' text, being deliberately stylised, expressionist and artificial. Unlike the other characters on stage, the audience can, of course, hear the music that conjures up her remembered experience; in effect, Williams uses the polka tune as a framework for Blanche's memory of Allan's suicide to encourage us to empathise with his tragic heroine. Yet as the dramatic action develops, Williams can be seen to use this sound effect in subtly different ways to predict Blanche's tragic future as well as to resurrect her past. It is therefore very important to review the different instances of the Varsouviana that occur throughout the play.

At the very end of the first scene, Stanley casually mentions Blanche's dead husband – 'You were married once, weren't you?' Instantly *the music of the polka rises up, faint in the distance*. When she admits 'The boy – the boy died', the stage directions indicate *She sinks back down before muttering, 'I'm afraid I'm – going to be sick!'* By closing the scene on this starkly memorable tableau, Williams has skilfully alerted the audience to the importance of the polka tune while leaving them in suspense as to its full significance.

It is at the very end of Scene VI, after their unsuccessful date, that the full significance of the Varsouviana is revealed to the audience as Blanche tells Mitch about the night Allan died. Following her accidental discovery of her young husband with another man, she explains how the fateful evening unwound to its horrific conclusion:

Blanche: Afterwards we pretended that nothing had been discovered. Yes, the three of us drove out to Moon Lake Casino, very drunk and laughing all the way.

Polka music sounds, in a minor key faint with distance.

TASK

Consider how far you feel it is significant, given Stanley's ethnicity, that Varsouviana means 'from Warsaw' (the capital of Poland) and that this polka was originally a Polish peasant dance. Think about why Williams chose this simple, sentimental tune to express such heightened and complex emotions. You can listen to it being played on YouTube by searching for 'Varsouviana County Fair'.

We danced the Varsouviana! Suddenly in the middle of the dance the boy I had married broke away from me and ran out of the casino. A few moments later – a shot!

The Polka stops abruptly.

Blanche rises stiffly. Then the Polka resumes in a major key.

I ran out – all did! – all ran and gathered about the terrible thing at the edge of the lake! I couldn't get near for the crowding. Then someone caught my arm. 'Don't go any closer! Come back! You don't want to see! See? See what! Then I heard voices say – Allan! Allan! The Grey boy! He'd struck a revolver into his mouth, and fired – so that the back of his head had been – blown away!

She stops and covers her face.

It was because – on the dance-floor – unable to stop myself – I'd suddenly said – 'I know! I know! You disgust me ...' And then the searchlight which had been turned on in the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that's stronger than this – kitchen – candle ...

Mitch gets up awkwardly and moves towards her a little. The Polka music increases. Mitch stands beside her.

Mitch: [drawing her slowly into his arms]: You need somebody. And I need somebody too. Could it be – you and me, Blanche?

She stares at him vacantly for a moment. Then with a soft cry huddles in his embrace. She makes a sobbing effort to speak but the words won't come. He kisses her forehead and her eyes and finally her lips. The Polka tune fades out. Her breath is drawn and released in long, grateful sobs.

Blanche: Sometimes – there's God – so quickly!

The richness and complexity of Williams' dramaturgy is shown in his merging of aural and verbal symbolism, as the Varsouviana polka music plays in the background to externalise the memory of Allan's death. Blanche tells Mitch how falling in love had illuminated her world with a 'blinding light' which was brutally extinguished when he killed himself. The impact on Mitch is powerful, as having heard the tragic story of Allan's death and seeing for himself Blanche's extreme distress, he finds the confidence to offer her comfort. This point in the play is in fact the high-water mark of Blanche's fortunes, as the scene closes on the two lonely souls clasping each other and seemingly united in an attempt to console each other for their grief and loss. The Varsouviana continues to play as

Blanche huddles in his embrace as if it may take on a new significance as the mood music for a potential healing process, although the next scene, of course, makes it clear that this can never be. Crucially, from this dramatic midpoint onwards the audience is fully aware of the polka tune's symbolic function as an index or signifier for Blanche's psychological state.

In Scene VIII, Williams employs the Varsouviana to foreshadow Blanche's own sexual annihilation as opposed to reviving the memory of Allan's. The parallels between Blanche's accusation of Allan and her rape by Stanley were explicitly linked as far back as Scene II, in another example of Williams' brilliant use of proleptic irony. When Stanley roughly grabs hold of Allan's poems and love letters, Blanche instinctively recognises the threat he poses, saying 'I hurt him the way you would like to hurt me'. Here it is Stanley's malicious gift of a bus ticket back to Laurel that initiates the sound effect of the polka tune, as opposed to anything Blanche herself does:

The Varsouviana music steals in softly and continues playing. Stella rises abruptly and turns her back. Blanche tries to smile. Then she tries to laugh. Then she gives both up and springs from the table and runs into the next room. She clutches her throat and then runs into the bathroom. Coughing, gagging sounds are heard.

As in Scene I, the polka tune is linked here with Blanche feeling physically sick due to her isolation and vulnerability to Stanley's menace. At the end of this scene, with Blanche still offstage, the Varsouviana is heard as Stella, who has gone into labour, leaves for the hospital:

He is with her now, supporting her with his arm, murmuring indistinguishably as they go outside. The 'Varsouviana' is heard, its music rising with sinister rapidity as the bathroom door opens slightly. Blanche comes out twisting a washcloth. She begins to whisper the words as the light fades slowly.

As the scene ends, with Blanche ominously alone in the Kowalskis' apartment for the very first time, she whispers the simple words of a Mexican folk song, 'El Pan de Mays' (Maize Bread) as if the significance of the Varsouviana is fading. No longer linked solely with the death of Allan Grey, the polka tune now presages another defining crisis in Blanche's life.

Scene IX opens on a tableau in which Williams spells out the new duality of the Varsouviana in resurrecting the past and foretelling the future and reveals Blanche's frightening mental deterioration:

Blanche is seated in a tense hunched position in a bedroom chair that she has re-covered with diagonal green and white stripes. She has on her scarlet satin robe. On the table beside the chair is a bottle of liquor and a glass. The rapid, feverish polka tune, the

'Varsouviana', is heard. *The music is in her mind; she is drinking to escape it and the sense of disaster closing in on her, and she seems to whisper the words of the song.*

With the arrival of Mitch, *the polka tune stops* but as she realises the depth of his anger, Blanche begins to voice her experience of the Varsouviana aloud. In theatrical terms, Williams' signature sound effect has now become something that his characters discuss openly in another remarkable instance of his experimental dramatic approach:

Blanche: You've stopped that polka tune that I had caught in my head. Have you ever had anything caught in your head? Some words, a piece of music? That goes relentlessly on and on in your head? No, of course you haven't, you dumb angel-puss, you'd never get anything awful caught in your head!

As Mitch continues to show his anger and bitterness, Blanche resorts to her usual modus operandi of play-acting and pretence:

Blanche: Something's the matter tonight, but never mind. I won't cross-examine the witness. I'll just – [*She touches her forehead vaguely. The polka tune starts up again.*] – pretend I don't notice anything different about you! That – music again ...

Mitch: What music?

Blanche: The 'Varsouviana? The polka tune they were playing when Allan – Wait!

A distant revolver shot is heard, Blanche seems relieved.

There now, the shot! It always stops after that.

The polka music dies out again.

Yes, now it's stopped.

Mitch: Are you boxed out of your mind?

Later in this scene, at the appearance of the sinister Mexican Woman selling flowers for the dead, *the polka tune fades* in again. The eerie and haunting cry of '*Flores para los muertos*' triggers a sequence of terrible memories for Blanche, who tells Mitch of the family illnesses and deaths that she tried to compensate for by an ultimately ruinous series of promiscuous encounters with the young soldiers training at the local army camp. The polka tune is heard onstage throughout her painful 'confession' but as her tale concludes and the Mexican Woman drifts away, so too does the sound of the Varsouviana.

Fittingly it is in the play's final scene when the Varsouviana is heard for the last time. Blanche is waiting with Stella and Eunice for the arrival of a visitor whom she believes to be her old beau Shep Huntleigh. In fact, of course, the man coming to take her away is a doctor from the asylum. As she awaits her doom, *the Varsouviana faintly plays*, suggesting the jumble of past trauma and present horror that exists inside her mind. When she finally sees the doctor and realises that he is a stranger *the Varsouviana 'is playing distantly*. Williams uses the polka tune for the last time to externalise the fragmentation of Blanche's sense of self as Stanley *'suddenly pulls back his chair and rises as if to block her way* in a physical gesture that evokes the horror of the night he raped her:

She rushes past him into the bedroom. Lurid reflections appear on the walls in odd, sinuous shapes. The 'Varsouviana' is filtered into weird distortion, accompanied by the cries and noises of the jungle. Blanche seizes the back of a chair as if to defend herself.

The ultimate '*distortion*' of the polka tune and the way in which it is overlaid by the cries of the jungle vividly suggests that Blanche's mind has given way, brutalised and ruined at last by Stanley. From the first scene to the last, then, Williams makes the fullest possible use of the Varsouviana to dramatisé his heroine's interior life and cue the audience into her complex psychology.

Lighting effects

Lighting cues are often employed to create dramatic tension or emphasise a key aspect of a character's emotional state. At the end of Scene IV, for instance, when Stanley grins at Blanche in triumph, knowing that Stella has rejected her sister's proposed escape plan, *'as the lights fade away, with a lingering brightness on their embrace, the music of the "blue piano" and trumpet and drums are heard'*. The image of husband and wife clinging together in silhouette as the stage lights fade strongly indicates their indissoluble union. At the beginning of Scene VIII, which centres on Blanche's abortive birthday party, the lighting effects are extremely suggestive:

The view through the big windows is fading gradually into a still-golden dusk. A torch of sunlight blazes on the side of a big water-tank or oil-drum across the empty lot toward the business district which is now pierced by pin-points of lighted windows or windows reflecting the sunset.

The lighting cues here achieve several important effects. As the second of the four scenes that take place on the afternoon and evening of 15 September, Williams uses the dying afternoon sunshine here to denote that Blanche's hopes of Mitch's arrival are fading along with the light. In practical terms the decline of the day towards 'sunset' indicates the day's ongoing timeline of events, while also symbolically representing the slow death of all her dreams. In terms of the

Varsouviana
Lurid reflections
Pin-points of lighted windows

Build critical skills

Select and analyse another of Williams' uses of lighting cues in the play. How does he employ the visual effects of light to emphasise certain aspects of setting, staging, plot or characterisation?

language with which Williams chooses to describe the lighting here, one might see the image of harsh light bouncing starkly off an ugly metallic object within a bleak industrial landscape as somewhat repellent, and the verbs 'blazes' and 'pierced' as connoting violent aggression. The arresting final image of 'lighted windows or windows reflecting the sunset' may be seen to suggest the myriad other stories of personal triumph and tragedy that could be going on behind those other windows picked out by the dying light of day. Perhaps Blanche's story is just one human tragedy among many.

The interior and the exterior

The fact that the street outside the Kowalskis' cramped apartment is also visible to the audience implies that the home offers scant protection from the wider world. Other places mentioned but never seen remind us of further aspects of the characters' lives — the bowling alley and the Four Deuces provide an index for Stanley's macho working-class world just as Belle Reve, the Moon Lake Casino and the Flamingo Hotel are the staging posts for Blanche's downfall. The interface between these inside and outside spaces suggests the apartment is a liminal or threshold place rather than a safe haven. At the climax of Scene X, one of the play's most startling dramatic effects is seen:

[Blanche] sets the phone down and crosses warily into the kitchen.

The night is filled with inhuman voices like cries in a jungle.

The shadows and lurid reflections move sinuously as flames along the wall spaces.

Through the back wall of the rooms, which have become transparent, can be seen the sidewalk. A prostitute has rolled a drunkard. He pursues her along the walk, overtakes her and there is a struggle. A policeman's whistle breaks it up. The figures disappear.

Some moments later the Negro Woman appears around the corner with a sequined bag which the prostitute had dropped on the walk. She is rooting excitedly through it.

Blanche presses her knuckles to her lips and returns slowly to the phone. She speaks in a hoarse whisper.

Just before Stanley rapes Blanche, therefore, the back wall separating the Kowalskis' apartment from the world outside disappears and Williams presents what is in effect a brief 'play within a play'. This unusual expressionist effect allows the playwright to give the audience a glimpse of the feral, febrile, brutal violence occurring out on the street: a sexually promiscuous woman has robbed an alcohol-soaked client and he chases after her to gain his revenge. Luckily for her, there is an officer of the law around to prevent a full-blown attack.

The outbreak of violence between these sketchy male and female figures — who clearly resemble stereotypical aspects of the characters of Blanche and Stanley — prefigures the personal violation about to happen inside the apartment shortly thereafter, with no one around to prevent it. The final appearance of the Negro Woman, caring nothing for the prostitute's misfortune and eager to profit from her loss, suggests the dog-eat-dog ethos that pervades here.

Metatheatre

Metatheatre is a self-conscious awareness in a play of its status as a theatrical performance. Such awareness can work through the persistent use of theatrical images, metaphors, or through more overt structural devices such as a 'play within the play'. Blanche is from the start a woman in disguise who orchestrates a range of theatrical performances to cover up the reality she cannot bear to face. In *Streetcar* there are a number of important metatheatrical references, images and elements that contribute to the overall structural cohesion of the text:

▶ When Blanche first arrives at Elysian Fields, she is described as 'definitely dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district'. She is, in other words, inappropriately costumed for this context.

▶ Blanche's trunk of clothes may be seen as a kind of dressing-up box in which she stores the costumes she needs in order to perform her chosen roles. Stanley sees this clearly, asking Stella: 'What is this sister of yours, a deep-sea diver who brings up sunken treasures? Or is she the champion safe-cracker of all time?'. Cruelly but accurately, Stanley sums up her life in Laurel as 'the same old lines, same old act, same old hokey'. Later he taunts her with her efforts to create an appropriate 'setting' in which to perform:

▶ **'You come in here and sprinkle the place with powder and spray perfume and cover the light-bulb with a paper lantern, and to and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are the Queen of the Nile!'**

▶ Much is Blanche's admiring audience in Scene III as she uses music and choreography to create her illusions and maintains her performance throughout Scenes V and VI. Once Stanley has told Mitch about Blanche's past, it is sheer outrage at the gap between the ladylike spinster schoolmarm role she has been playing all summer for his benefit and the sordid truth about the Flamingo Hotel that provokes him to violence in Scene IX.

▶ In Scene I Stanley removes his vest in front of Blanche, which is clearly inappropriate as well as offering an implied sexual threat, while his gaudy bowling shirt signals his brash and competitive nature. When he appears wearing the silk pyjamas he bought for his wedding night with Stella, his costume seems to suggest that his rape of her sister is predestined.

▶ At the start of Scene X Blanche is described as having 'decked herself out in a somewhat soiled and crumpled white satin evening gown and a pair

Context

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c1599-1602) contains the most famous example of a 'play-within-a-play' ever written. Hamlet asks some strolling players to perform a play he calls 'The Mousetrap' in order to expose his uncle's murder of Hamlet's father, telling himself 'the play's the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King'. In *Streetcar*, the tableau of the prostitute, the drunk and the Negro Woman dramatises a minor crime while foreshadowing (as opposed to mirroring) a worse one.

TASK

There are frequent references to acting and performance throughout the play, such as 'make-believe' and 'putting on an act'. Working either on your own or with a partner, collect as many other instances of metatheatres as possible and analyse the ways in which this technique may shed light on Williams' themes and characters.

of scuffed silver slippers . . . she is placing the rhinestone tiara on her head before the mirror of the dressing-table and murmuring excitedly as if to a group of spectral admirers'. In effect she is presented as an actress putting the final touches to her costume before going on stage.

- ▶ Williams makes use of a non-naturalistic tableau or mini 'play within a play' with the interpolated vignette of the prostitute, the drunk and the Negro Woman in Scene X.
- ▶ In Scene XI Blanche is dressed first in a 'red satin robe', which connotes sexuality, before changing into a jacket of 'Della Robbia blue'. The blue of the robe in the old Madonna pictures'. Symbolically she may be seen as shedding the costume (and hence the role) of the 'scarlet woman' here and adopting instead the persona of the Holy Virgin. As she talks to Stella and Eunice, she is hidden behind the 'portières' – full-length curtains which serve to divide the living space. In effect, Blanche is seen to be waiting for the curtain to rise on her final performance in the Kowalskis' apartment.



▶ Vivien Leigh as Blanche and Marlon Brando as Stanley in Eila Kazan's film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1951

Context

In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams describes the Pollitt mansion as 'Victorian with a touch of the Far East', thus neatly encapsulating that play's uneasy juxtaposition of foreign, erotic and exotic elements and stifling conservative morality. In *Streetcar* the 'epic fornications' indulged in by Blanche's and Stella's Dubois ancestors seem glaringly out of context when set against the beauty of Belle Reve in its prime.

Binary opposites

The concept of binary opposites stems from the work of the French intellectuals Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) and Roland Barthes (1915–80), who were closely associated with the theory of structuralism.

In terms of literary theory, structuralists argue that since the meaning of a word is not actually contained in its name, we tend to construct its meaning by relating each word to its opposite. They characterise words as symbols which signify society's ideas and suggest that meaning emerges from the 'gap' between two opposing concepts, thus in order to grasp an idea such as masculinity, we refer to its binary opposite, femininity. Layers of inferential meaning can emerge when a writer consciously structures a text using core oppositions and patterns like this, and in *Streetcar* Williams makes frequent use of this technique by inviting his readers and audiences to consider such dichotomies, particularly as embodied by Stanley and Blanche:

- ▶ masculinity and femininity
- ▶ birth and death
- ▶ regeneration and decay
- ▶ materialism and idealism
- ▶ physicality and spirituality
- ▶ new and old
- ▶ present and past
- ▶ fertility and sterility
- ▶ bold colour and white light.

Williams often places similar or contrasting ideas or concepts close together to shed light on them both. Consider Williams' reasons for using the structural techniques of **juxtapositioning**, **patterning** and **doubling** in the following examples:

- ▶ The first half of the play is dominated by Stanley, who generally gets most sympathy from the audience here; this is reversed in the latter stages as we come to transfer our sympathies to Blanche.
- ▶ Blanche queens it over the bathroom; Stanley's poker buddies throw him into the shower to sober up.
- ▶ Blanche sings 'Paper Moon' in the bathroom while Stanley tells Stella the truth about her sister's life behind Blanche's back.
- ▶ Blanche discusses Hawthorne, Whitman, Poe and Browning with Mitch (Scene III) while Stella reads 'a book of coloured comics' in Scene IV just before Blanche tries to appeal to her 'to recognise 'art', 'poetry' and 'music' as necessary for a civilised life.
- ▶ Stanley removes his vest in front of Blanche while she asks him to zip-up the back of her dress.
- ▶ Stanley rifles through Blanche's trunk; she steals his whisky and hides the evidence.

CRITICAL VIEW

Structuralism has been defined as the search for the underlying patterns of thought in all aspects of human life; it involves comparing the relationships between elements in any given system.

- ▶ The choric figures darken; first we hear the tame seller with his 'red hot's', later it is the Mexican Woman selling her flowers for the dead.
- ▶ Both Stanley and Blanche are shown as hardened heavy drinkers: but he is free to drink with his poker buddies in public, the social mores of the genteel Old South mean she has to lie about her drinking and keep it secret.

✓ Freshshadowing

Freshshadowing, sometimes referred to as proleptic irony, is a method of providing structural cohesion by dropping hints to the audience that help them to predict future events. Williams makes much use of this technique:

- ▶ In Scene 1, Stanley throws a package of meat for Stella to catch, which Eunice and the Negro Woman find highly amusing; they have clearly decoded the sexual innuendo behind his macho gesture. In hurling the meat Stanley signals his sexual domination over her and in catching it, Stella reveals the depth of her sexual obsession with him.
- ▶ Stanley's metaphorical rape of Blanche's trunk, 'jewellery' and love-letters, plus Mitch's botched assault on her, prefigure the climax of the play.
- ▶ Stanley's 'breakdown' during the poker night, which involves him being overwhelmed against his will by his friends, foreshadows Blanche's breakdown and forcible restraint before she is taken to the asylum.
- ▶ Blanche's kissing the Young Man foreshadows the revelation that she was sacked for seducing her student.

Language

Language in *Streetcar* taps into a wide range of dramatic effects. Thus, for example, the following section discusses stage directions – which are obviously not part of the experience of an audience in the theatre in written form – in order to stress that 'language' in this play needs to be seen as more than simply words or dialogue, but as an integral part of Williams' overarching 'plastic theatre' experience.

The play's title

Williams was a genius at signalling the central theme of a text with an evocative metaphorical title which gets straight to the heart of things (see also *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*) but if the brilliantly sleazy *A Streetcar Named Desire* is not the greatest title ever, it is hard to think of many that can rival it. As Felicia Hardison Londré notes, 'the mundane concreteness of "streetcar" and the abstract quality of aspiration evoked in "desire" point to the many antinomies – thematic, symbolic, and imagistic oppositions – imbedded throughout the play' (Londré in Roudané, 1997). Moreover, the fact that there really were streetcars called Desire and Cemeteries rattling through New Orleans reinforces the real-life context and setting of the play as well as drawing attention to Blanche's fatal journey via Elysian Fields to her symbolic 'death' in the asylum.

Although he had apparently had *A Streetcar Named Desire* in mind all along, Williams did consider some other potential titles for the play. In 1945 he wrote to his agent, Audrey Wood: 'I have been buried in work the last week or so and am about 55 or 60 pages into the first draft of a play which I am trying to design for famous American actress Katharine Cornell. At the moment it has four different titles, *The Moth*, *The Poker Night*, *The Primary Colors*, or *Blanche's Chair in the Moon*. It is about two sisters, the remains of a fallen Southern family. The younger, Stella, has accepted the situation, married beneath her socially and moved to a Southern city with her coarsely attractive, plebeian mate. But Blanche (the Cornell part) has remained at Belle-reve, the home place in ruins, and struggles for five years to maintain the old order' (Williams, *Notebooks*, 2006).

✓ Images, motifs and symbols

Writers often use related language patterns and clusters to infuse certain characters with particular associations, evoke a specific mood or atmosphere, or draw attention to a particularly significant theme. In *Streetcar* Williams uses recurring images, motifs and symbols to create a sense of dramatic and structural coherence and while his symbolism is often verbal (which is why this section has been placed under the A02 strand of 'language') remember that he interweaves and reinforces these linguistic images with powerfully vivid aural and visual effects. Thus it is important to think about how the overarching effects of Williams' 'highly wrought, complex images, motifs and symbols enrich the unique atmosphere of the play.

- Some of *Streetcar's* most powerful visual, aural and verbal motifs are listed here:
- ▶ the coke stain on Blanche's white dress, which symbolises her tarnished past
 - ▶ Blanche's frequent baths, which suggest her wish to cleanse herself
 - ▶ the Chinese paper lantern, which represents Blanche's wish to disguise reality and substitute 'magic'
 - ▶ the streetcar's journey, which connotes sexual passion
 - ▶ Desire and Cemeteries, which connote Blanche's fatal journey and explicitly link sex and death in terms of two types of love characterised by Freud as eros (the desire for life) and thanatos (the longing for oblivion and death)
 - ▶ the Varsoviana, which represents the death of Allan Grey
 - ▶ the blue piano, which evokes the earthy multicultural atmosphere of the Vieux Carré
 - ▶ Blanche and Stanley as symbolic archetypes reflecting a wider cultural debate about the nature of the Old South and the new post-war America.
- ## Animals
- ▶ Blanche is described as having something about her that suggests a 'moth' (page 5).
 - ▶ Stella describes Stanley to Blanche as of a 'different species' (page 10).
 - ▶ Blanche asks Stella if Mitch is a 'wolf' (page 27).

TASK
Consider the possible significance of Williams' four rejected titles and suggest which of the play's themes each seems to encapsulate.

TASK
Analyse Williams' purpose in establishing Blanche as a practised drinker who is not above sneaking Stanley's whisky behind his back in Scene 1; he comments 'Liquor goes fast in hot weather' as he 'holds the bottle to the light to observe its depletion'. What is the effect on the audience here?

- ▶ After Stanley throws the radio out of the window Stella yells: 'Drunk – drunk – animal thing, you!' (page 31).
- ▶ When he calls for Stella, Stanley is described as '*throw[ing] back his head like a baying hound*' (page 33).
- ▶ When they make up after their fight Stanley and Stella are said to '*come together with low animal moans*' (page 33).
- ▶ In her set-piece speech to Stella, Blanche describes Stanley as 'bestial', 'like an animal' and 'ape-like' (pages 40–41).
- ▶ Stanley mocks Blanche as she sings in the bathroom as 'canary-bird' (pages 59 and 63).

TASK

Analyse these key imagery clusters and assess the ways in which they serve to highlight Williams' themes. If you work with other students here you might allocate one section to each group. Each group might produce a PowerPoint or poster that logs and analyses such instances to present to the rest of the class.

- ▶ Stella is disgusted by Stanley's table manners and calls him a 'pig' (page 65).
 - ▶ Mitch accuses Blanche of 'lapping it up all summer like a wild-cat!' (page 71).
 - ▶ Blanche renames the Flamingo Hotel the 'Tarantula Arms' and describes herself as 'a big spider! That's where I brought my victims' (page 73).
 - ▶ Blanche talks of 'casting her pearls before swine' to Stanley (page 78).
 - ▶ The outside scene in the *Vieux Carré* is described as a 'jungle' and '*inhuman voices like cries in a jungle*' are heard (page 79).
 - ▶ Stanley 'springs' at Blanche, calling her 'Tiger – tiger!' in excitement as she tries to fight him off (page 81).
 - ▶ Eunice accuses the men of 'making pigs of yourselves' (page 82).
 - ▶ Blanche wants to wear a brooch shaped like a 'seahorse' (page 82) for her imaginary cruise with Shep Huntleigh.
 - ▶ As Blanche is about to be taken to the asylum, '*cries and noises of the jungle*' are heard (page 87).
 - ▶ When Blanche screams in fear as Stanley tears the lantern down, '*the men spring to their feet*' (pages 87–88).
 - ▶ As the doctor calms Blanche, '*the inhuman cries and noises die out*' (page 89).
 - ▶ Stella '*sobs with inhuman abandon*' after Blanche has been taken away (page 89).
- ### Fire, redness, blood and heat
- ▶ Blanche uses the word 'bleeding' to describe the suffering of the dying at Belle Reve (page 12).
 - ▶ Blanche emerges from the bathroom '*in a red satin robe*' (page 18).
 - ▶ After Stanley snatches her love-letters from Allan Grey, Blanche declares 'I'll burn them!' (page 22).
 - ▶ Blanche tells Stella that Stanley is 'what we need to mix with our blood now that we've lost Belle Reve' (page 23).
 - ▶ The Mexican tamale vendor calls out 'red hots!' (page 23).

- ▶ Stanley complains 'Goddamn, it's hot in here with the steam from the bathroom' (page 67).
- ▶ Blanche snouts 'Fire! Fire! Fire!' to scare Mitch away (page 75).
- ▶ Stanley tells Blanche it is 'a red letter night for us both' (page 77).
- ▶ Blanche appears with '*a tragic radiance in her red satin robe following the sculptural lines of her body*' (page 83).

Water, sea and rain

- ▶ Blanche sings 'From the land of the sky blue water/They brought a captive maid' (page 16).
- ▶ Stanley asks 'What is this sister of yours, a deep-sea diver who brings up sunken treasures?' (page 18).
- ▶ Stanley's card game is called 'Spit in the Ocean' (page 28).
- ▶ After his drunken rage on poker night, Stanley says 'I want water' and is thrown into the shower by Mitch (page 32).
- ▶ Blanche tells Stella she has sought protection under 'leaky roofs! . . . because it was storm – all storm' (page 45).
- ▶ Blanche asks the Young Man, 'Don't you just love these long rainy afternoons' (page 48).
- ▶ Blanche tells Mitch about Allan's suicide and the sight of his dead body, 'the terrible thing at the edge of the lake' (page 57).
- ▶ Stanley tells Stella that when Blanche had to leave Laurel she was 'washed up like poison' (page 60).
- ▶ Blanche declares after one of her many baths, 'Oh, I feel so good after my long, hot bath, I feel so good and cool and – rested!' (page 63).
- ▶ Blanche fantasises about 'taking a swim, a moonlight swim at the old rock-quarry . . . only you've got to be careful to dive where the deep pool is – if you hit a rock you don't come up until tomorrow' (page 75).
- ▶ Blanche tells Stanley she is going on 'a cruise of the Caribbean on a yacht' with Shep Huntleigh (page 76).
- ▶ Stanley foams up the beer bottle and holds it over his head saying to Blanche, 'Ha-ha! Rain from heaven! . . . Shall we bury the hatchet and make it a loving-cup?' (page 77).
- ▶ Blanche asks if the grapes are 'washed'. She declares, 'I can smell the sea air . . . when I die, I'm going to die on the sea. . . . And I'll be buried at sea sewn up in a clean white sack and dropped overboard . . . into an ocean as blue as my first lover's eyes!' (pages 84–85).

TASK

In Scene 11 Blanche is heard singing the sentimental ballad 'From the land of the sky blue water'. The lyrics can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/From_the_land_of_the_sky_blue_water. In what ways is this song appropriate for Blanche? You might consider:

- her situation in the Kowalskis' flat
- how it might foreshadow the play's climax
- ideas of your own.

Light

- ▶ Blanche's '*delicate beauty must avoid a strong light*' (page 5).
- ▶ Stella tells Blanche she is 'standing in the light' and is visible through the curtains to the poker players (page 27).
- ▶ Blanche asks Mitch to place an 'adorable little coloured paper lantern' over the bare bulb in the bedroom (page 30).
- ▶ Blanche asks the Young Man to light her cigarette (page 48).
- ▶ Blanche tells Mitch 'I want to create – joie de vivre! I'm lighting a candle' (page 52).
- ▶ Blanche tells Mitch being in love with Allan Grey was like turning on 'a blinding light' but that since his death 'the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that's stronger than this – kitchen – candle' (pages 56–57).
- ▶ Stella lights the candles on Blanche's birthday cake (page 66).
- ▶ Stanley describes making love with Stella as getting '**them coloured lights going**' (page 68).
- ▶ Mitch forces Blanche into the light and stares at her as she '*cries out and covers her face*' (page 72).
- ▶ As Blanche is being taken to the asylum, Stanley rips down her paper lantern '*and extends it towards her. She cries out as if the lantern was herself*' (page 87).

Top ten quotation

Dialogue

Williams is famous for the way he brings his hauntingly memorable characters to life through dialogue which can be realistic, vivid, poetic, tragic, comic – and sometimes all of the above. In Shakespeare's day, blank verse was the usual form of language for characters of a high social rank while common characters often spoke in prose; in *Streetcar*, Blanche's dreamy, educated, high-register language, which incorporates literary references and French and Spanish vocabulary, is a world away from Stanley's colloquial working-class demotic argot. Blanche is an English teacher, so literature is obviously part and parcel of her stock-in-trade, but Williams carefully chooses her authors and references to add extra layers of meaning. Her ability to summon up apt literary allusions and references makes her speech sound very different from that of Stella, who, like Stanley, is much more literal.

Williams' lyrical and beautiful dialogue is one of his most characteristic qualities as a dramatist, although one which he came to feel left him 'dated' later in his career. In the mid-1960s, when his reputation was in decline, he wrote:

My great bête noir [el] as a writer has been a tendency ... to poeticize ... and that's why I suppose I've written so many Southern heroines. They have the tendency to gild the lily, and they speak in a rather florid

style which seems to suit me because I write out of emotion, and I get carried away by emotion.

Williams, 2006

In *Streetcar*, however, when he was at the peak of his dramatic powers, his dialogue was (and still is) seen as one of the greatest strengths of the play. The critic Alfred Uhry has suggested that *A Streetcar Named Desire* contains the finest dialogue ever written for an American play.

The four main characters are very clearly differentiated by their dialogue. Blanche's language includes artificial, affected and stylised elements which Stanley scorns as 'phony', and Williams gives her symbolic songs to sing. Stanley's language is direct, aggressive, colloquial, sometimes crude and often downright funny. Stella's language is characteristically straightforward, prosaic, sensible and down-to-earth, while Mitch's dialogue is an oddly touching mixture of the naïvely and comically simplistic and the lyrically tender.

Build critical skills

Look closely at these examples of dialogue from each of the four main characters. Analyse the ways in which Williams has given them all highly idiosyncratic speech styles to represent key aspects of their personalities.

Blanche: *He was a boy, just a boy, when I was a very young girl. When I was sixteen, I made the discovery – love. All at once and much, much too completely. It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow, that's how it struck the world for me.* (page 56)

Stanley: *Don't ever talk that way to me! 'Pig – Polack – disgusting – vulgar – greasy!' – them kind of words have been on your tongue and your sister's too much around here! What do you two think you are? A pair of queens? Remember what Huey Long said – "Every Man is a King!" And I am the king around here, so don't forget it!* (page 65)

Stella: *I don't believe all of those stories and I think your supply-man was mean and rotten to tell them. It's possible that some of the things he said are partly true. There are things about my sister I don't approve of – things that caused sorrow at home. She was always – flighty!* (page 61)

Mitch: *I don't mind you being older than what I thought. But all the rest of it – God! That pitch about your ideals being so old-fashioned and all the malarky that you've dished out all summer. Oh, I knew you weren't sixteen any more. But I was a fool enough to believe you was straight.* (page 73)