

Find other examples of the dialogue given to the four main characters that you find particularly effective and analyse the ways in which Williams gives Blanche, Stanley, Stella and Mitch a distinctive speech style or idiolect. How do the ways the characters speak enhance your understanding of Williams' characterisation and themes?

Taking it further ▶

A classic episode of *The Simpsons*, 'A Streetcar Named Marge' (excerpts are on YouTube), contains humour deriving from Stanley's dialogue. This may suggest that *Streetcar* has gained that iconic status of a text that is alluded to and adapted so commonly that references simply do not require explaining.

Which aspects of Williams' form, structure, language and themes stand out to you as distinctive enough to be spoofed on a mainstream television comedy series?

Contexts

Target your learning

- What different critical positions might be applied to *A Streetcar Named Desire* to extend your knowledge of the text? (AO1)
- How can setting *A Streetcar Named Desire* within a broad range of contexts deepen your understanding of the play and the ways in which different audiences might respond to it? (AO3)
- What links might be traced between *A Streetcar Named Desire* and various other literary texts? (AO4)
- How can applying various critical approaches enrich your understanding of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and the ways in which different readers might interpret it? (AO5)

This section is designed to offer you an insight into the influence of some significant contexts in which *A Streetcar Named Desire* was written and has been performed and received, but contextual material must always be used with caution. Referencing a context is only valuable when it genuinely informs a reading of the text. Contextual material which is clumsily 'bolted on' will contribute little to your argument.



▶ A young Tennessee Williams

Biographical context

Thomas Lanier Williams was born in Mississippi in 1911, to a particularly ill-matched couple. Hard-drinking travelling salesman Cornelius Coffin Williams (C.C.) had little in common with his highly strung, snobbish wife Edwina, the daughter of a clergyman, and they were at odds for most of their married life. The middle child of three, 'Tom' was extremely close to his mother and his sister, Rose, and remained on friendly terms with his younger brother, Dakin, who was C.C.'s favourite, but he feared and hated his abusive, bullying father. This unhappy and dysfunctional family moved around a lot during his childhood and he was restless and unsettled throughout his adult life.

Context

Of Rose's decline into madness Williams (2006) wrote: 'We have had no deaths in our family but slowly by degrees something was happening much uglier and more terrible than death.' This comment - reminiscent of the Gothic horrors Blanche witnessed at Belle Reve - suggests that for Williams, who had once thought of ending *Streetcar* with his heroine throwing herself under a train, her removal to the county asylum may have been even worse.

Williams grew into a shy, gentle, artistic young man. After some early success in publishing short stories and articles he studied journalism at the University of Missouri where he was nicknamed 'Tennessee' by his fellow students on account of his Southern birth. Unfortunately C.C. forced him to withdraw from his course and get a job as a clerk at the shoe factory where he himself worked, and after three years of this drudgery, Williams had a nervous breakdown. Meanwhile his beloved sister was showing signs of severe mental illness and was diagnosed with dementia praecox (an early name for schizophrenia) at the age of just 18. Rose was subjected to an extreme and radical form of primitive brain surgery (a pre-frontal lobotomy) and then consigned to a mental institution until her death in 1996. Margaret Bradham Thornton suggests that 'the shadow of what happened to Rose stayed with [him]; she would be the model for more than fifteen characters, and Williams would give her name to many others' (Williams, 2006).

Although traumatised with guilt at what he saw as his failure to protect Rose, after transferring to the University of Iowa Williams finally graduated in 1938 at the age of 27. For the next few years he lived a bohemian and peripatetic existence while continuing to work on his short stories and plays. Finally, in 1944, *The Glass Menagerie* opened to rave reviews and made him an overnight theatrical sensation, followed three years later by the play for which he will always be remembered, the multi-award-winning *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

In the decade or so after *Streetcar*, Williams maintained a tremendous work rate, writing other major plays such as *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959). Unfortunately, as Margaret Bradham Thornton puts it, '[his] prodigious output took its toll on Williams, and while his plays were winning awards and being made into films ... Williams was losing his way' (Williams, 2006). Despite his professional success, his private life was always at least bordering on the chaotic and disastrous. He had a long relationship with his secretary Frank Merlo (who loyally supported Williams through frequent bouts of clinical depression) when homosexuality was still considered immoral and shocking by mainstream society, but following Merlo's death in 1963, his life seemed to spiral out of control.

Between 1959 and 1979, although he wrote 15 new plays as well as poetry, a novel and some short stories, only one work, *The Night of the Iguana* (1961) was well received, and his critical reputation went into a sharp decline which lasted until his death. At the same time his depression worsened and in 1969 his brother Dakin had to have him temporarily committed to a psychiatric hospital due to his alcoholism and drug addiction. By the time of his lonely death in a New York hotel room in 1983, the glory days were long behind him.

In his fascinating essay 'Person-to-Person', Williams wrote:

I still find it somehow easier to 'level with' crowds of strangers in the hushed twilight of orchestra and balcony sections of theatres than with individuals across a table from me. Their being strangers somehow makes them more familiar and more approachable, easier to talk to.

Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and Other Plays*, 1976

Given this statement, although we must be careful not to assume that any text is a simplistic reworking of the writer's own personal experience, it is at least worth discussing how far his greatest and most unforgettable characters – Blanche and Stanley in *Streetcar*, Brick, Big Daddy and Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and Amanda, Tom and Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*, for instance – may be seen to reflect aspects of his mother, father, sister and even himself. For many of his audiences, readers and critics, it is endlessly fascinating to speculate about the interplay between Williams' life and art, with homosexuality, mental illness, alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence and family dysfunction forming so large a part of his personal truth as well as his fictional world.

Historical, social and cultural contexts

The American Century and American Dream

It was Henry Luce, the influential publisher of *Life* magazine, who coined the phrase 'the American Century' to encapsulate what many people saw as the USA's duty to use its unparalleled power and influence for the greater good of the world. Writing in 1941, Luce urged his fellow Americans to enter World

Taking it further

The poet Ted Hughes (1930–98) declared: 'Every work of art stems from a wound in the soul of the artist ... Art is a psychological component of the autoimmune system that gives expression to the healing process. That is why great works of art make us feel good.' Think about the extent to which this might be true of Williams' work.

War II and back the Allies rather than remain isolated, as they had done for most of World War I. He argued:

Throughout the 17th century and the 18th century and the 19th century, this continent teemed with manifold projects and magnificent purposes. Above them all and weaving them all together into the most exciting flag of all the world and of all history was the triumphant purpose of freedom. It is in this spirit that all of us are called, each to his own measure of capacity, and each in the widest horizon of his vision, to create the first great American Century.

This idealistic global aspiration can be seen as allied with another equally powerful myth which played out in a more domestic context: the notion of 'the American Dream'. This concept grew out of the Declaration of Independence (4 July 1776) in which the Founding Fathers of America set out their vision in the justification for breaking away from British rule:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

James Truslow Adams, who coined the phrase in 1931, suggested:

[The American Dream] that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of material plenty, though that has doubtlessly counted heavily. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as a man and woman, unhindered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations, unimpeded by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class.

America has often portrayed itself as a 'melting pot' nation which welcomes immigrants of all races and religions to a new life of freedom and opportunity. Often escaping from poverty, oppression and conflict, America seemed a blank slate upon which they could create their vision of a land of freedom and opportunity where success depended not on birth or privilege but on hard work and courage. This idealistic vision is encapsulated in the words of Emma Lazarus (1849–87), inscribed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, in which the New World of America addresses the old:

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

In summary, then, 'the American Century' and 'the American Dream' were concepts fully rooted in the cultural landscape of the post-war era. The former represented the USA as a kind of Good Samaritan helping other countries to achieve democracy, progress and economic security, while the latter was a way of uniting the various different groups of immigrants who came to the USA in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to create a cohesive national ethos.

In time, however, as things began to seem rather less glorious and more materialistic, many writers became preoccupied with showing how the American Dream had died – or even that it had only ever been an illusion in the first place. Once 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' can be used to justify the actions of people – like Stanley Kowalski – who are set on claiming their slice of the action at any price, it seemed to many writers high time to question whether this mythic totem of popular culture did little more than make people increasingly unhappy, competitive and insecure. In suggesting that society was basically a level playing field, the responsibility for personal success or failure fell squarely upon the individual, and in a supposed meritocracy it can be much harder to blame one's lack of success on other people.

Thus it is in their relentless and painful probing of the gap between the underpinning cultural tradition of twentieth-century America and what they saw as the essential truth of the matter that the great tragic dramatists Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill found their essential theme; they set out to question the cultural values which the vast majority of their contemporaries held dear.

The American South and New Orleans

The 'American South' is used more as an expression of an entire way of life than as a geographical location. Even today, the South has its own distinctive way of life, and its culture, food, literature and music have influenced the rest of the country immensely. Always a cultural melting pot, the South's rich mix of Native Americans, European settlers and imported African slaves has had a major impact upon its history and collective psyche.

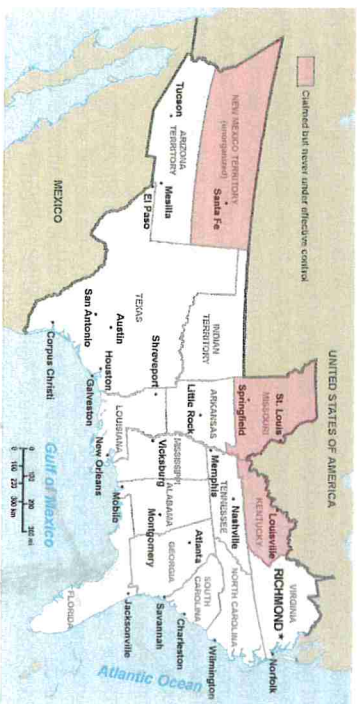
During the American Civil War (1861–65), the Southern 'Confederate' states (including Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia and Tennessee) fought against the mainly Northern 'Union' states to defend their right to keep slaves. After the heavy defeat of the South, slavery was officially abolished throughout America in 1865 and from then on the industrialised North grew inexorably more powerful, both politically and economically, than the still largely agricultural South.

Taking it further

Other archetypal American Dream texts which you might enjoy comparing with *Streetcar* include F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and Miller's plays *All My Sons* (1947) and *Death of a Salesman* (1949).

Context

Abraham Lincoln (1809-65) became president of the USA in 1861. Knowing that his Republican Party was anti-slavery, the Southern slave-owning states broke away from the Union. Lincoln steered his country through the Civil War, but six days after the South's final surrender he was assassinated by the fanatical Southern actor John Wilkes Booth.



▶ The Southern states fought as the Confederate States of America in the Civil War

ante-bellum: (from Latin meaning 'before the war') often used of the Old South prior to the defining event of the American Civil War.

After the Civil War, many white southerners bought into an enduring nostalgic mythic representation of the South in its **ante-bellum** heyday as a haven of peace, prosperity and chivalrous gallantry. For black southerners the Old South was a completely different story. In *Streetcar*, which is set more than 80 years after the end of the Civil War, it is still possible to see that the seeds of the events that lead to Blanche's tragic downfall were sown way back in time when the degenerate aristocratic DuBois began to drink, whore and gamble away Belle Reve, which we can be sure was anything but a beautiful dream for the slaves who worked the plantation.

New Orleans, the city in which Blanche found herself a stranger, is world famous for its multicultural and multilingual heritage and as the birthplace of jazz. However, all the beautiful Spanish-style architecture, dazzling Mardi Gras parades and delicious soul food cannot obscure the extreme poverty in which many of its inhabitants live even today. In some people's eyes, 'the Big Easy' should never have been built where it was: the climate is hot and humid, and because it is surrounded by water on three sides, flooding is a constant risk.

Context

After Hurricane Katrina (2005), when 80 per cent of the city's 225,000 inhabitants had to be evacuated when the city flooded, there was a feeling that the federal government would have acted more decisively if rich white northerners had been affected rather than poor, mainly black southerners.

In *Streetcar*, Williams dramatises a brutal culture clash between the New Orleans industrial worker and his aristocratic intellectual rival. Enraged and intimidated by the old-fashioned Southern values Blanche embodies, Stanley determines – albeit unconsciously at first – to destroy the threat she poses to his brave new world. Stella is presented as caught between her loyalty to the 'beautiful dream' of the past, symbolised by Blanche and their lost childhood home in the countryside, and the brash and thrilling immediacy of her new life in the big city of New Orleans. Once upon a time Blanche might have defined herself solely in terms of her status as a ladylike southerner and even after her arrival in New Orleans 'Vieux Carré she persists in keeping up this act because it is so much less painful than facing the truth about her penniless, hard-drinking, promiscuous existence. But Stanley – go-getting, practical, down-to-earth and materialistic – will have none of it. Stella's baby is born on the very night he brutally rapes Blanche and tips her into outright madness. Stella's decision to stay with the father of her child and allow her sister to be committed to a mental asylum may symbolise the shifting social power structures of the new America.

Smith-Howard and Heinzelman (2005) have noted the significance of the clash between Blanche and Stanley over the loss of Belle Reve in Scene II; what the plantation represents to each of them is powerfully suggestive.

Belle Reve:

is Blanche's lost, beautiful dream, rich with family heritage and pride; Stanley is interested only in the property's material or monetary real estate value. He is happy in the loud, harsh, and dirty world of the Vieux Carré of New Orleans, whereas Blanche prefers finer accommodations, the bucolic setting of hundreds of acres of land and large white pillars on a grand veranda that provide lounging quarters out of the midday sun.

Ironically the Belle Reve Blanche lost was in fact a very twisted version of this 'lost beautiful dream': a Gothic horror straight out of the nightmare stories of Poe.

Top ten quotation

Stanley is a second-generation immigrant industrial worker who lives in Elysian Fields (an appropriate setting for a war hero) but here Blanche's genteel values are totally out of context. Thus as emblems of the moribund Southern aristocracy on the one hand and an energetic immigrant community determined to make its way in the world on the other, Blanche and Stanley are engaged in a desperate struggle only one of them can win. Stanley declares just before he rapes her, **'We've had this date with each other from the beginning!'** It is certainly possible to see Blanche as a lost soul trapped in limbo between the old world and the new, as Williams' great contemporary Elia Kazan put it, she is 'a last dying relic . . . now adrift in our unfriendly day.'

Build critical skills

The poet and critic T.S. Eliot coined the term 'objective correlative' to describe the way in which objects, situations or events are used to represent characters or emotions. How far do you think it is true to say that Belle Reve is the objective correlative for Blanche's identity as a Southern belle?

Context

G.P.A. Healy's famous portrait *The Southern Belle* (1860) shows the beautiful Miss Sallie Ward of Louisville, Kentucky, in her prime. You can view the painting online.



▲ The Vieux Carre district of New Orleans

Gender roles

During World War II women had become used to filling the men's roles in the workplace and had gained considerable freedom and financial independence; for a while it had seemed possible for women to pursue their own version of the American Dream. *A Streetcar Named Desire* presents a sharp critique of the way the institutions and attitudes of post-war America affected women's lives; just as later, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the rivalry between Maggie and Mae raises questions about the role of college-educated women in the 1950s and the extent to which they were still defined by their fertility and domesticity. Many of Williams' female characters seem psychologically trapped in the cultural pragmatics of the Old South, as Blanche and Stella's dependence on men exposes attitudes to women during the transition from the old world to the new. Both Blanche and Stella – and Eunice, for that matter – see male companions as their only means to achieve happiness and depend on men for both economic and psychological reasons. When Stanley uses the Napoleonic code to try to muscle in on Stella's inheritance it seems exploitative, yet Blanche's escape plan (throwing herself on the mercy of Shep Huntleigh) still involves playing a submissive and dependent role. Ironically, when Blanche invokes the vision of Shep arriving to rescue her in Scene XI, it is in fact the doctor who offers her his gentlemanlike support when he escorts her to the asylum.

Literary context

Intertextuality

The influential French feminist and literary theorist Julia Kristeva (b. 1941) coined the term 'intertextuality' in 1966 to describe the complex network of links which exist between texts. Working with Kristeva's notion of intertextuality allows us to place *Streetcar* at the centre of a web of interconnected texts and contexts that show just how fascinating and challenging the play remains, almost 70 years after it was written.

Southern Gothic

Feminist critic Molly Haskell, herself a southerner, has described:

[T]he attraction of the Lost Cause mythology – we were grander, purer in defeat than were those crass, winner-take-all Yankees with their greedy industrial culture. The myth of the Lost Cause and the moral superiority of losing defined and fed our romantic sense of ourselves, our specialness, our region marked by a defeat that wasn't quite a defeat in a war that wasn't quite over.

M. Haskell, *Frankly, My Dear: 'Gone with the Wind' Revisited*, 2009

As a writer closely associated with the Southern Gothic genre, Williams overhauls and deconstructs the traditional stereotype of the demure Southern belle by making Blanche DuBois not just the damsel in distress she pretends to

CRITICAL VIEW

Kristeva, like Roland Barthes, sees 'meaning' not as an intrinsic part of a text but as brought to it by individual readers. Through 'intertextuality', meaning is mediated through the writer's and reader's awareness of other texts. Make a list of all the literary texts Williams refers to within the text and try to analyse why he has chosen them.

be for her naive suitor Mitch's benefit, but also a promiscuous alcoholic who threatens to trash her sister's marriage.

Williams once described Southern Gothic as allied with 'an underlying dreadfulness in modern experience' and his adoption of the nickname 'Tennessee' was an acknowledgement of his conscious commitment to dramatising the culture, values and conflicts of his native land. In 'Person-to-Person', Williams captured the tragicomic desperation of the Southern experience in general and the Southern writer in particular in this memorable vignette:

I once saw a group of little girls on a Mississippi sidewalk, all dolled up in their mothers' and sisters' cast-off finery, old raggedy ball gowns and plumed hats and high-heeled slippers, enacting a meeting of ladies in a parlour with a perfect mimicry of Southern gush and simper. But one child was not satisfied with the attention paid her performance by the others ... so she stretched out her skinny arms and threw back her skinny neck and shrieked to the deaf heavens and her equally oblivious playmates, 'Look at me, look at me, look at me!' And then her mother's high-heeled slippers threw her off balance and she fell to the sidewalk in a great howling tangle of soiled white satin and torn pink net, and still nobody looked at her.

I wonder if she is not, now, a Southern writer.

Williams, *Car on a Hot Tin Roof*, 1976

Williams' contemporary Flannery O'Connor, one little girl who did grow up to be a Southern writer, noted with irony the cultural divide between the North and the South:

[A]nything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic.

Like O'Connor and many other practitioners working within the Southern Gothic genre, Williams dramatises with both humour and pathos the apparent inability of the genteel gracious gallantry of the mythic antebellum Old South to survive amid the brash consumerist confidence of booming post-war America, and never more powerfully than in *Streetcar*, in which this debate is framed around the binary oppositions embodied by Stanley and Blanche, the future and the past.

Finally, when the doctor arrives at the end of *Streetcar* to escort Blanche to the lunatic asylum, he ironically conforms to the heroine's outdated notion of the chivalrous Southern beau who will offer her the gentlemanly support and kindness she craves so desperately. Her ultimate collapse can be seen as the apocalyptic meltdown of an entire semi-mythological culture.

The epigraph: Hart Crane

And so it was I entered the broken world

To trace the visionary company of love, its voice

An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)

But not for long to hold each desperate choice.

The epigraph to *A Streetcar Named Desire* is the fifth stanza of Hart Crane's poem 'The Broken Tower'. Williams admired and identified with Crane (1899–1932) and there are significant parallels between their lives: both had difficult relationships with their parents, struggled with alcoholism and were trying to find their identities as gay men at a time when there was still intense social and cultural stigma attached to homosexuality. Like the tortured young poet Allan Grey in *Streetcar*, Hart Crane committed suicide at a tragically young age; because 'The Broken Tower' was the last poem he wrote before his death, some readers have seen it as akin to his last will and testament. As Gilbert Debusscher has noted, '[a]mong the few permanent possessions Williams took with him on his constant peregrinations were a copy of Hart Crane's collected poems and a framed portrait of the poet' (Debusscher in Roudané, 1997). Williams made sure that the epigraph was printed in the theatre programmes to make it as easy for an audience to compare Crane's words with his drama as for a reader: the poem captures a sense of love as a transitory illusion or gambler's 'desperate choice', which is strongly suggestive of Blanche's experience of love in a 'broken world'.

Build critical skills

One very well-known example of the Southern Gothic genre is Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). The text features an elderly neighbour addicted to morphine, a rabid dog wandering the streets, a bizarre fire that destroys another neighbour's house, the ferocious Ewell family, the local superstitions about Boo Radley and the attack on the Finch children in the dark woods. Review the elements in *Streetcar* that might place it within the Southern Gothic framework.

Romanticism

Romanticism (c. 1770–1830) was a European cultural phenomenon which encompassed not only literature in all its forms but also art, music, politics, philosophy, science and religion. Set against a historical background of radical change in which traditional social, religious, economic and political beliefs were challenged and reinterpreted, it followed on from and partly rebelled against the previous age of Enlightenment, preferring originality, imagination and freedom to reason, self-restraint and order.

Taking it further

You can read the full text of 'The Broken Tower' online. Go to <http://oldpoetry.com> and search on 'Harold Hart Crane'; click on 'The Broken Tower'.

Taking it further

It is interesting to compare Williams' dramatic representations of the South (and its women) with the work of some female prose writers associated with the Southern Gothic genre. You might begin by dipping into Carson McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (1951), Flannery O'Connor's *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965) or Donna Tartt's *The Little Friend* (2002).

The word Romantic is linked to the French word *romance* and implies a search for meaning and identity. The Romantics believed that artists should seek the essential truth about life and mediate that truth through their own personal experiences. Their quintessential archetype was the Byronic hero, an anti-establishment outcast who hovered on the margins of mainstream society, questioning its values, conventions and ideas. The origin of this archetype was the poet Lord Byron himself, a legendary figure whose significance as a cultural icon proved hugely influential both during his own lifetime and for generations to come. Above all, Byron's wandering exile has come to symbolise the Romantic quest for freedom, mobility and space in a harsh and unsympathetic world.

In many ways Williams himself was just such an artistic and cultural outsider, 'a poet in a practical world, a homosexual in a heterosexual society', as Nancy M. Tischler has written (Tischler in Roudané, 1997). Williams, like Byron, Poe and Crane, was a misfit whose imagination and poetic spirit left him out of tune with the pragmatic mores of his contemporary society. He regretted the loss of the South's traditional creed of elegance, beauty and gallantry and his plays are scattered with romantic dreamers like Blanche – and himself – tragically out of place in the new America and driven to use sex, alcohol and often drugs as a means of escape. The interweaving of his lush, sometimes grandiose romantic visions and the grimy reality of ordinary life is one of the hallmarks of Williams' life and work, and in *Streetcar* the clash between Romanticism and pragmatism is encapsulated by the opposing figures of Blanche and Stanley.

CRITICAL VIEW

The director Ela Kazan, who worked with Williams often, said: 'everything in his life is in his plays, and everything in his plays is in his life.' Williams himself said: 'I can't expose a human weakness on the stage unless I know it through having it myself'. How far do you find this psychological interpretation a useful critical lens to apply to the play?

Context

The public image of Lord Byron (1788-1824) played as great a role in his success as did his poetry. Lionised by literary London, he was run out of town when rumours spread about his unorthodox love life; he had an affair with his half-sister and was sexually attracted to young boys. By 1816 he was living a nomadic life abroad, in permanent exile from England. He died in Greece at the age of 36.

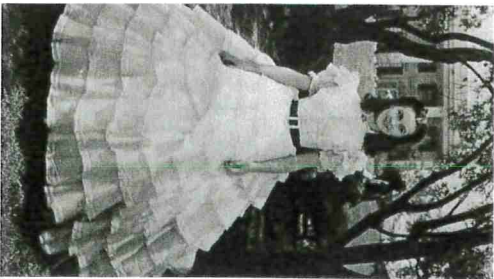
Parallels with *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955) also dramatises Williams' ideas of history, family, religion and community and minutely deconstructs traditional Southern stereotypes as Williams entwines the tragic stories of a powerful man who wrongly thinks he has cheated death and his once famous and idolised son. Both Big Daddy Pollitt and his younger son Brick can be viewed through the dramatic prism of classical and Shakespearean tragedy, as both characters are highly gifted but also deeply flawed. Brick's weary lethargy is reminiscent of Hamlet's inability to act decisively and face up to a family crisis, and perhaps even more resonant is Williams' decision to have the fallen sporting idol hobble about with

his broken foot in a cast, given that the name 'Oedipus', the most famous of all tragic heroes, may be translated literally as 'swollen foot'.

This book has already mentioned several comparisons and connections between *Streetcar* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, but there are others:

- ▶ Like Blanche, Maggie can be seen as the archetypal demure Southern belle pining for a chivalrous beau viewed through a distorted lens. While many of the minor characters in *Streetcar* provide evidence of the easy, bustling multicultural nature of working-class New Orleans, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* the comfortable caricature of the happy slave or 'Uncle Tom' is undermined by Williams' symbolic use of the Pollitt's black servants, never seen but heard off stage at key dramatic moments. When Mae cries, 'Oh Big Daddy, the field hands are singing for you!' the servants' chosen spiritual is 'Pick a bale of cotton', a song about the hardships of slavery which reminds the audience that the Pollitt inheritance was founded on the forced labour of thousands of black agricultural workers.
- ▶ Both texts deal with families and inheritance: up for grabs in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*'s Big Daddy's \$10 million fortune, '29,000 acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile', and the family vultures are circling even before he realises he's dying. In *Streetcar*, although Belle Reve was lost before the action of the play begins, Stanley hopes, (like Mae and Gooper in *Cat*) that legal documents will prove his claim.
- ▶ Both Blanche and Brick prefer to live in the past, before the suicide of the homosexual characters they loved and lost. They are haunted by guilt at having responded harshly to Allan and Skipper respectively. (Like Allan, Skipper never appears on stage.)
- ▶ Brick and Blanche both use alcohol to numb their emotional pain and retreat to the bathroom in times of stress.
- ▶ Both Big Daddy's and Blanche's birthday parties end disastrously.
- ▶ Both plays metaphorically link desire and death, in that while Blanche's streetcar is heading for Cemeteries, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* it's a toss-up as to whether Mae's sixth baby will arrive before Big Daddy dies of cancer – 'the stork and the reaper are running neck-and-neck'.
- ▶ The plays end with the real or imagined birth of a baby: Stella and Stanley's son and a projected one 'sired by Brick, and out of Maggie the Cat!'
- ▶ Blanche and Brick clash violently with Stanley and Big Daddy: in each case romantic ruin is offset with brute strength and vigorous vulgarity.
- ▶ The cheap collapsible camp-bed upon which Stanley rapes Blanche is paralleled by the huge double bed which dominates Brick and Maggie's bedroom in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. This is the marital bed in which the glamorous young couple no longer make love, as Big Mama says, pointing at the bed, 'When a marriage goes on the rocks, the rocks are *there*, right *there*!'



▲ Vivien Leigh as Scarlett O'Hara on the family's plantation Tara in the film *Gone with the Wind* (1939)

Build critical skills

Using the critical lens of queer theory (see p.80), consider how far *Car* on a *Hot Tin Roof's* great showdown between Brick and Big Daddy might be seen as wish-fulfilment: the dialogue Williams never had with his own harsh father, who despised him as a 'sissy'. Compare this with the ways in which Blanche and Stella describe Allan Grey, who is driven to suicide because of contemporary attitudes to homosexuality.

Performance context

The 1951 Kazan film: Vivien Leigh and Marlon Brando

Vivien Leigh was a Hollywood celebrity who had won an Academy Award for her iconic performance as the wilful and beautiful Southern belle Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Adapted from Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel, *Gone with the Wind* is still probably the most famous film ever made and certainly the high-water mark of Hollywood's golden age. Leigh was a little-known English actress when she won the part of Scarlett in a blaze of publicity following a three-year search for the perfect heroine; if not quite the rags-to-riches cliché of the understudy who becomes an overnight star, it was as close as made no difference.

The beautiful, flirtatious and yet innocent belle was the quintessential pattern of ideal young womanhood among the aristocracy of the doomed Old South, and in *Gone With the Wind* Scarlett O'Hara's story plays out against the epic backdrop of the American Civil War. As Molly Haskell suggests, Scarlett is a fascinating character:

[P]oised at one of those pivotal moments in the redefining of women's roles ... when the entire catechism of traditional womanly virtues – piety, chastity, sacrifice, living through and for others, and unflinching loyalty to family and country – virtues held up since time immemorial, seem to be turned on their head! In their place are offered such alarmingly worldly aspirations as self-fulfilment, sexual freedom, mobility, choice, and appetite for things beyond home and family.

Haskell, 2009

It is worth bearing in mind that *Gone with the Winds* most famous location, Tara, the fabled plantation which Scarlett adores, would have been the iconic template evoked in the minds of most of Williams' contemporaries with every mention of Belle Reve in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. While Blanche is far more fragile than the feisty Scarlett, as John Russell Taylor has noted:

[S]he does set one wondering what happened to that kind of Southern belle with the passage of time and the decay of the South, and

Scarlett's obsession with Tara is well matched by Blanche's with Belle Reve. More specifically, what would have become of Scarlett when she had aged and her beauty faded to a degree that she could not always get her own way just by stamping her little foot?

J.R. Taylor, *Vivien Leigh*, 1984

Context

'People have speculated that Williams had Leigh in mind when he wrote *Streetcar* and created the other great Southern belle of the twentieth century', notes Molly Haskell in *Frankly, My Dear: 'Gone with the Wind' Revisited* (2009): '... there's a lot of Scarlett in Blanche, the Southern beauty cast back on her own fragile resources ... [yet] the clear-eyed Scarlett ... unlike Blanche, sees things as they are and never looks back, never yields either to nostalgia or to the temptation of vice'.

Legend has it that while Leigh was not director Elia Kazan's first choice to play Blanche in the 1951 film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, he was intrigued by the idea of watching Scarlett O'Hara go mad. Jessica Tandy, who played Blanche in the original Broadway stage production, was in any case not a big enough box-office star to headline an edgy production which dealt with rape, promiscuity and homosexuality. Given that Leigh's role as Scarlett meant that for a whole generation of cinema-goers she simply was the archetypal belle of American popular culture, her wrecked and ruined turn as Williams' belle gone bad seems to capture something of the apparently inevitable decline of the South itself.

Whereas Leigh was Hollywood royalty, the casting of Marlon Brando as Stanley offers a sense of life shadowing art. At first mocked by traditionalists for his 'mumbling' delivery, he was instantly acclaimed by the younger generation as a ground-breaking new acting talent; according to film director Martin Scorsese, he was 'the marker': 'There's "before Brando" and "after Brando."' Unlike the classically trained Leigh, Marlon Brando was closely associated with the modern 'Method' school of acting. Working with the ideas of the Russian actor and director Konstantin Stanislavski, 'Method' actors sought to tap into the psychology of their characters in order to inhabit them more fully.

In some ways the fundamental contrast between Brando and Leigh as practitioners of their craft echoes the unbridgeable gulf between Stanley and Blanche, yet to the surprise of many, in the words of the film critic Pauline Kael, this chalk-and-cheese combination gave 'two of the greatest performances ever put on film', with Leigh's Blanche 'one of those rare performances that can truly be said to evoke both fear and pity'. Leigh herself, who suffered from periodic

bouts of manic depression and mental illness, admitted, 'I had nine months in the theatre of Blanche DuBois. Now she's in command of me.' Indeed, while Williams felt Leigh's Blanche was 'everything that I intended, and much that I had never dreamed of', the actress herself felt that playing the role had 'tipped me over into madness'.

Given that the roles with which Leigh is indelibly associated reflect the same mythic cultural archetype of the Southern belle, it seems fitting that at the 1951 Academy Awards she was named Best Actress for playing Blanche DuBois just as she had been for Scarlett O'Hara 12 years before. Karl Malden and Kim Hunter also won Oscars as Best Supporting Actor and Actress for their portrayals of Mitch and Stella, but the Academy failed to acknowledge Marlon Brando's electrifying portrayal of Stanley despite its having established him as perhaps the greatest film actor of the post-war era. Even in later years, when his fatal cocktail of hubristic arrogance and self-indulgence had virtually destroyed his career, his rare screen appearances were still greeted as major cultural events. Appropriately enough, his most famous screen performance was as another working-class outsider determined to find his own inverted version of the American Dream – Vito Corleone, the penniless Sicilian immigrant who becomes a Mafia don in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972).

Changes from stage to screen

Several of the changes from stage to screen made in the 1951 Kazan film suggest that what was acceptable to an elite, sophisticated, minority Broadway theatre audience was unacceptable in a mainstream, conservative Hollywood film production context. Bound as it was by the notoriously restrictive film Production Code, as R. Barton Palmer notes, Hollywood 'was committed to banishing from significant representation or often mere mention the themes Williams found so compelling and unavoidable'. In effect, the Code dictated that films had to 'be structured by the central principle of nineteenth-century melodrama: evil was to be punished and good rewarded, while any sympathy for wrongdoing should be eliminated by compensating moral value (such as the unlikely reform in the last five minutes of hitherto enthusiastic sinners)'.

Streetcar's exploration of many areas of human existence which the Code defined as off-limits – alcoholism, promiscuity, rape, homosexuality and madness – was problematic enough, while the fact that Stanley's rape of his sister-in-law goes officially unpunished created a particular dilemma, even if Blanche's own sexual transgressions meant that 'suffering for a less-than-virtuous female main character did not violate then-acceptable notions of a poetically just ending' (Barton Palmer in Roudané, 1997).

At this point, it is worth setting *Streetcar* against the highly specific cultural context of the signature movie genre of the 1940s, the *film noir* (from the French for 'black cinema'). The leading female characters of these sexy, stylish crime melodramas were often treacherous *femmes fatales* who broke the rules of mainstream society and were brutally punished for their actions, while their male counterparts were often cynical private detectives bent on ferreting out their guilty secrets; there are obvious ironic parallels here with the roles of Blanche and Stanley. As Barton Palmer has noted, since the *film noir* genre popular at the time frequently featured attractive but morally ambiguous *femmes fatales* who wound up 'dead, imprisoned, or otherwise punished', *Streetcar's* shocking conclusion 'would be acceptable to filmgoers used to similar portrayals of feminine misadventure'.

After the film was completed, however, the censors demanded certain cuts and alterations which were made without the consent of either Williams or director Elia Kazan, as Smith-Howard and Heintzelman (2005) note.

The major cuts were:

- ▶ several close-up shots which overtly emphasised the sexual passion between Stanley and Stella
 - ▶ the rape scene, leaving Stanley's attack implied rather than obvious
 - ▶ several references to Blanche's promiscuous past.
- The major alteration was to the ending of the play. The censors did not wish to have Stanley appear to 'get away with' his near-incestuous rape, so the famous final 'Holy Family' tableau of Stella, Stanley and the baby was removed. Instead, Stella rebels against Stanley, seizing the baby and telling him: 'We're never going back. Never, never back. Never back again.' The film closes with her running upstairs to Eunice, as she did at the end of the poker night, while once again Stanley bellows: 'STELL-LAHHHHH!'

Build critical skills

A05 requires you to demonstrate an understanding that the meaning of a text is not 'fixed' and that at various places within a text different interpretations are possible. These different interpretations may be supported by reference to the ideas of named critics or particular critical perspectives, but may also emerge from your own discussions with other students and your teacher. What matters is that you have come to a personal interpretation of the play through an understanding of a variety of ways of making meanings.

Taking it further

Watch a classic film noir such as *Laura* (1944), *Double Indemnity* (1945) or *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) and compare the sexual tension that exists between the male and female leads with Williams' portrayal of Blanche and Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. You can find out more about the *noir* genre online at www.filmnoirstudies.com.