***A Streetcar Named Desire*** – questions to prepare for class discussion

**Scene 1**

1. Look closely at the **opening stage direction** (from *The exterior of a two-storey corner* *building* … to …*can be heard overlapping*).

What **atmosphere** and **mood** are created in this stage direction, and how does Tennessee Williams use sights, sounds and smells to create them? Quote and comment on specific details.

1. What are your initial impressions of

* Stanley
* Stella *and*
* Blanche?

Find and comment on supporting evidence from both the dialogue and the stage directions: for example, why is Blanche described as ***incongruous*** and as suggesting ***a moth***?

1. In the long scene between Blanche and Stella), What do we learn about Blanche’s character? (*You could consider her tendency to misrepresent the* *truth, her need for reassurance, her fears and anxieties, her defensiveness, her highly* *tense and nervous state of mind – and any other points*). What **dramatic means** are used to communicate all of this to the audience?
2. Blanche has a **long speech** about the decline of the DuBois family and the loss of Belle Reve. What do we learn from it about Blanche’s past experiences and about her reactions to them, then and now?
3. Find examples of some **poetic devices** that Blanche uses in this speech (*for example*, ***alliteration****,* ***assonance****,* ***metaphors****,* ***rhetorical questions****,* ***repeated patterns of******speech***). How do you respond to this poetic aspect of the speech? Is it appropriate to Blanche?
4. Look at the **dialogue** from Steve’s first words onwards and the long **stage direction** describing Stanley that follows it. Think of them as a single passage.

How has Tennessee Williams used this passage to make a powerful contrast with the previous scene, and especially with Blanche’s long speech? Try to comment on the ***kinds of language*** used to create Stanley and his world, as well as the content.

1. Williams develops the strong **contrast** between Blanche and Stanley.

Note some of the ways in which Stanley presents a challenge to Blanche here, and comment on how he expresses himself. Does Blanche speak and behave differently here from earlier? What do you think is happening between the two characters?

In order to **consolidate your knowledge** of the scene, make some notes on

* Tennessee Williams’ use of **colour**, **costume**, **sound effects** and **physical movement/gestures** in this scene
* the **names of places** used in the scene, especially any **irony** associated with them
* the use of **contrast** – for example, between Stanley and Blanche, Stella and Blanche, Belle Reve and “the Quarter”
* the importance of **“minor” characters** – Eunice, Steve, the Negro Woman, the Vendor etc.
* how this opening scene prepares for **later developments** in the play.

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# Scene 2

1. Why does Stella try to tell Stanley how to behave towards Blanche? Do her words here confirm anything that we have already learnt

about Blanche in Scene 1?

1. Examine how Stanley responds to Stella in this part of the scene, and especially the

kind of **language** he uses. What impression does he make on you? (remember that he

is a travelling salesman).

3. What do the contents of Blanche’s trunk suggest about her character?

1. Look carefully at Stanley’s language (both verbal and body-language) as he examines

the contents of the trunk: what does it tell us about him?

1. Do you agree with Stella that Stanley’s interpretation of Blanche is “**stupid and horrid**”, or do you see any truth in it?
2. What techniques does Blanche use to try and manipulate Stanley? How far do you think that she succeeds?

7. What does the incident of the letters and poems reveal about Stanley and Blanche? Does Stanley change as a result of this incident?

8. What do we learn about Belle Reve and the DuBois family from Blanche’s long speech? Do you think that Tennessee Williams make any use of **symbolism** here?

9. Why do you think Stanley tells Blanche about the baby? Taking this with the last part

of the scene (from Blanche’s speech beginning “He’s just not the sort that goes for

jasmine perfume …”), decide whether Williams is contrasting Stanley and his family

and world with Blanche and hers.

In order to **consolidate your knowledge of the scene**, make some notes on

* Tennessee Williams’ use of **clothes**, **curtains**, **papers** and other everyday objects in this scene
* the theme of **loss** and **disintegration**
* what we have learnt so far about Stanley and Stella’s marriage, and the contrast between their lives and Blanche’s.

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# Scene 3

1. How does Williams contrast the world of the men playing poker and the world of the sisters? Look at **key words in the opening stage direction**, the conversation that accompanies the game, and how Stella and Blanche respond to the men. Is there a point being made about social class here?

Mitch begins to be interested in Blanche. What do we learn about him here, especially about the differences between him and Stanley? Which of them do you think comes out of the comparison better?

1. In the scene between Blanche and Mitch,

* What evidence is there that Blanche has a tendency to romanticise and misrepresent reality?
* What evidence is there that her manipulation of Mitch is working?

1. Why do you think Stanley “blows his top”? Do you think that Tennessee Williams wants us to see this as just brutal and contemptible behaviour?
2. Why exactly do you think that Stanley and Stella come back together again? Why is Blanche shocked by this? Take into account **the long stage** **direction**, and see if you can relate this passage to **the title of the play**.
3. Why do you think that Tennessee Williams decided to end the scene with the dialogue between Blanche and Mitch?

In order to **consolidate your knowledge** of the scene, make some notes on

* how **costume** is used in this scene to represent character and create atmosphere
* how **objects** are used to clarify character and relationships (especially the **radio**, the **cigarette case** and the **paper lantern**)

the use that Tennessee Williams makes of **contrast** for dramatic effect

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# Scene 4

1. Look carefully at the details of the **opening stage direction**. What do you think it is intended to communicate to the audience about Stella, Stanley and Blanche at this point?
2. Stella says “I’m not in anything I want to get out of.” What else does she say in the scene that helps to explain why she is content with her life with Stanley?
3. Consider the details of Blanche’s “idea of some kind” for getting Stella and herself away from Stanley. Is there any suggestion that this a realistic plan, or that it is likely to appeal to Stella? Is there any evidence that Blanche is already losing her mental balance as she describes her plan?
4. Look at Blanche’s long speech. Choose four phrases that best represent her view of Stanley, and say how far you think they are justified by what we have seen of him so far in the play.
5. How do you respond to Blanche’s description of progress and the things that we must “hold as our flag” at the end of this speech? Is she being manipulative and unrealistic, or can you agree to any extent with what she says?
6. When the second train passes, does Stanley’s behaviour justify anything that Blanche has just said?
7. Stella “has listened gravely to Blanche”. How do you interpret the way she and Stanley now behave? Does this ending to the scene also make an appropriate ending to the first “movement” of the play? (in the theatre it is the traditional place for the first interval).

# Scene 5

1. What evidence is there in the first part of this scene that Blanche is continuing to live in a world of fantasies about herself and other people? Do the contributions of Steve, Eunice and Stanley to this passage help us to get these fantasies into focus?
2. Stage directions speak of Blanche’s ***fear*** and ***almost panic***. What is she afraid of?
3. What does Blanche reveal about herself in the speech beginning *“I never* *was hard or self-sufficient enough”*? Give some evidence that what she says here is consistent with what we have learnt about her earlier in the play. You may be able to find four or five separate points.
4. What do we learn in the next section of the scene about Blanche’s state of mind as she waits for Mitch to visit her, and about her attitude towards him? Do you think that she is in love with him?
5. Why does Blanche behave as she does to the young man who appears at the door? Does she see in this young man something that she has lost? Does the encounter connect in any way with what she was saying earlier?
6. This final part of Scene 5 has been described as “a lyrical and erotic episode that takes us to the heart of Blanche’s tragedy”. Evaluate this comment, focusing on what may be ***lyrical***, ***erotic*** and ***tragic*** about it.

In order to **consolidate your knowledge** of the scene, make some notes on

* Tennessee Williams’s use of **poetic metaphors** in this scene, both in the dialogue and in the stage directions (for example, thunder, the paper lantern …)
* Signs in this scene of Blanche’s growing mental instability.

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# Scene 6

1. At the beginning of the scene we gain the impression that the evening has not worked out all that well for Blanche or Mitch. What evidence is there to suggest why this has happened?
2. In the next part of the scene, Mitch and Blanche seem to be moving closer together both physically and emotionally. How do the topics of conversation here, and their movements and gestures, support this interpretation?
3. In the same part of the scene, are there any moments at which the audience is likely to react differently to Blanche from the way Mitch reacts, because of what they know about her that he does not?
4. Why do you think that Mitch asks Blanche her age, and then begins to talk about his mother? Could this be described as a turning point in the scene between him and Blanche?
5. It has been suggested that Blanche’s story about Allan and Moon Lake Casino is at the centre of this scene, and even at the centre of the play. Why are these events important to Blanche? How have they shaped her life since?
6. Note the sound of the locomotive: why is it used here?
7. By the end of the scene, what has brought Mitch and Blanche together? You could consider what they have in common as well as their needs. Is their relationship here more than just a physical one?
8. How would you explain the last line of the scene (*“Sometimes – there’s God – so quickly!”*)? Especially, why do you think that Blanche sees a religious dimension to what has happened?

In order to **consolidate your knowledge** of the scene, make some notes on

* The use of **gestures** and **physical contact** between the characters in this scene
* The importance in the scene of references to Mitch’s mother and Blanche’s husband.

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# Scene 7

1. The scene is the turning point in the play, because it is here that we learn that Stanley has ruined any chance Blanche ever had of finding happiness with Mitch. Can we tell anything about Blanche’s mood, as her birthday celebrations approach, from the fact that she is “soaking in a hot tub” in the first part of the scene?
2. What exactly does Stanley reveal about Blanche’s past on pages? Distinguish between Lie Number One” and “Lie Number Two”. Can we tell anything about his attitude towards Blanche from the kind of language he uses to repeat the gossip?
3. Stanley’s revelations are punctuated by the sound of Blanche singing in the bathroom. Why does Tennessee Williams organise the scene in this way? (consider especially the meaning of Blanche’s song – is there any irony here?)
4. What do you think Stanley’s motives are in telling Stella about Blanche’s recent past? Why has he already told Mitch?
5. How does Stella react to what she learns?
6. How do you think Tennessee Williams wants you to feel about Stanley by the end of this scene? What does he want you to feel about Blanche?

In order to **consolidate your knowledge** of the scene, make some notes on

* The dramatic use that is made of the differences between what is happening in the bathroom and in the living room
* Any signs in the scene that Stella’s loyalties to Stanley and to Blanche are being tested here.

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# Scene 8

1. This is the shortest scene in the play, and clearly it is closely linked to the previous one. What kind of atmosphere is created in the first couple of pages? Does the empty chair at the table contribute to this?
2. On pages Stanley asserts his authority as “the king around here”. How exactly does he do this? Is his behaviour consistent with the way he has behaved previously in the play?
3. Are there any moments on the same pages when the audience might feel sympathy for Stanley’s point of view? If so, how is this sympathy created? (Note his comment later –“Don’t forget all that I took off her.”)
4. How do you react to Stanley’s “little birthday remembrance” to Blanche, and the way he delivers it? Do you agree with Stella that he is being cruel?
5. Are there signs that Stanley feels guilty about the way he is behaving at any points in the scene?
6. Look carefully at the last two pages of the scene . In what ways does this ending clarify the relationships between Blanche, Stella and Stanley? Is it obvious by the end of the scene how their futures are going to turn out?

* In order to **consolidate your knowledge** of the scene, make some notes on
* the variety of moods that it contains
* the importance of the telephone calls in its structure
* the importance of references to food in the scene.

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# Scene 9

1. The paper lantern in this play is usually interpreted as a symbol of Blanche’s fear of reality and her fragile efforts to avoid facing it. What evidence is there in the scene to back up this interpretation?
2. Blanche attempts to explain her conduct. Is there any evidence that Tennessee Williams wants the audience to accept her explanation and/or sympathise with her predicament? Look closely at the language and imagery here.
3. Examine how Tennessee Williams uses the theme of death and desire. Again, is the effect to make the audience sympathise with Blanche to any extent?
4. How do you interpret Mitch’s motives and actions at the end of the scene? Are they consistent with what we have learnt earlier about his character and his emotional history?

In order to **consolidate your knowledge** of the scene, make some notes on

* The dramatic use made in this scene of **contrasts** – as well as ***death and desire*** you could consider ***light and darkness***, ***innocence and guilt***, ***love and lust***, and so on.

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# Scene 10

1. Tennessee Williams speaks of Blanche’s “mood of hysterical exhilaration” in the opening stage direction. How is this idea developed in the scene?
2. How are the contrasts in character and mood between Blanche and Stanley expressed in their conversation? What exactly is likely to infuriate him about the way she is behaving here, once his suspicions have been aroused?
3. Explore how Stanley’s speech beginning “I’ve been on to you from the start!” sums up his relationship with Blanche, ands his opinion of her, from the beginning of the play. Again pay close attention to the language and the poetic imagery.
4. Stanley says, just before the rape, “We’ve had this date with each other from the beginning!” What do you think he means by this? Is there any evidence that he is right, either in this scene or earlier?

In order to **consolidate your knowledge** of the scene, make some notes on

* The use of **costume** in this scene to express **character** and **theme**.
* The use that Tennessee Williams makes of stage directions in this scene to support and extend his meaning. In what ways is his use of stage directions here characteristic of his technique throughout the play?

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# Scene 11

1. What evidence is there that Blanche has achieved some kind of serenity at this point? Are there also any signs of tension and fear?
2. How does Tennessee Williams contrast the world of the women with that of the men here?
3. What would you say is the importance of Eunice in the scene?
4. What exactly is it that destroys Blanche’s precarious calm? Is the familiar theme of fantasy and reality important here?
5. A reviewer of a recent production of this play said that the performance presented the end of the play as being as much Stella’s tragedy as Blanche’s.
6. How do you interpret Blanche’s final state of mind as she leaves?
7. For the Elia Kazan film version of the play, Tennessee Williams had to change the ending so that Stella rejected Stanley, saying that she was never going back to him and running up the stairs to Eunice’s flat with the baby. What strengths can you find in the original ending of the play, as printed? Why do you think that the changes were made for the cinema version?

In order to **consolidate your knowledge** of the scene, make some notes on

* The use that Tennessee Williams makes of poetic language and imagery in this final scene
* The significance of Blanche’s famous final words for the meaning of the play as a whole.