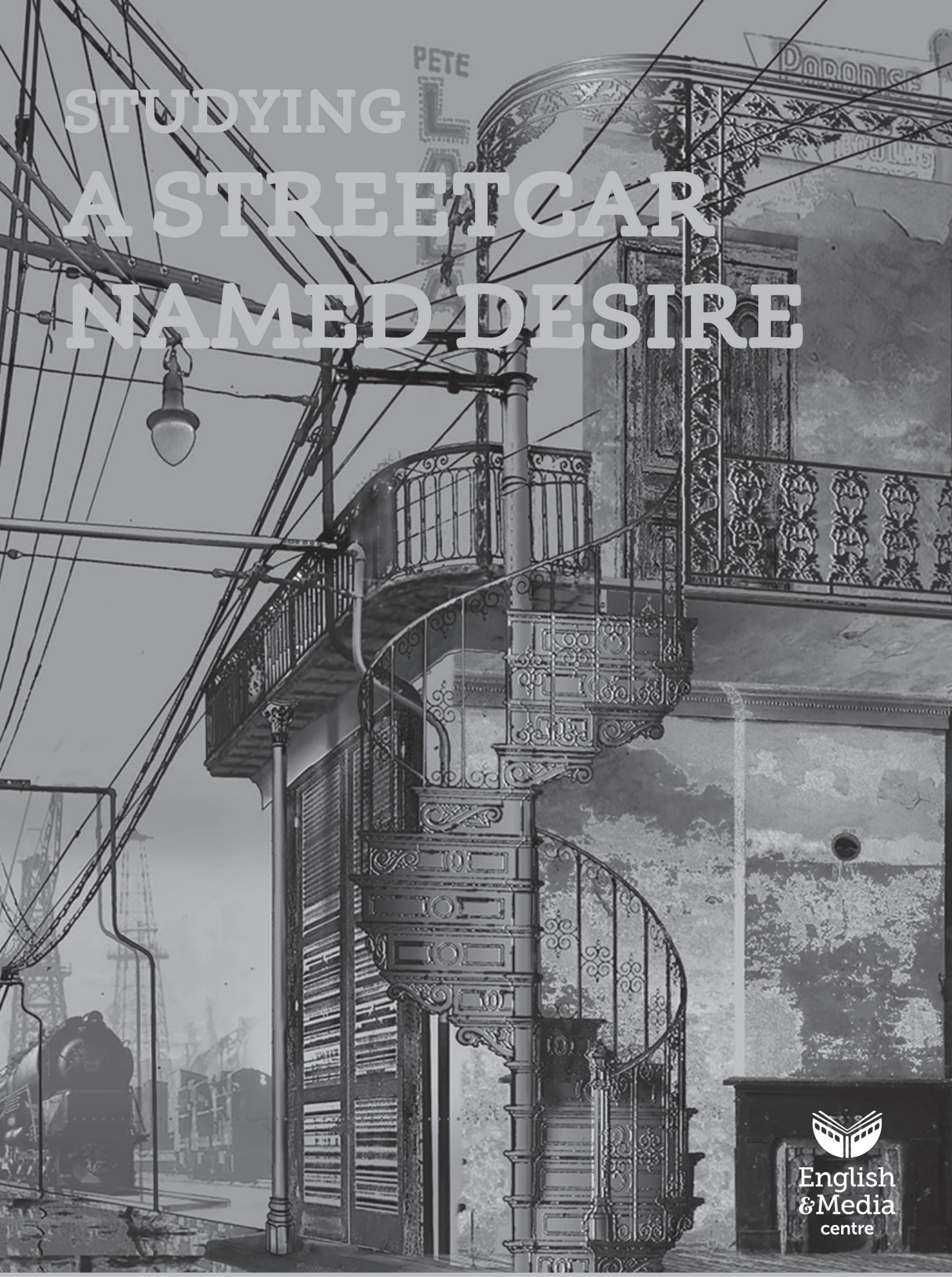

STUDYING A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

English &Media centre

An EMC Advanced Literature Resource

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The final scene of the original Broadway production of Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire* is shown on December 17, 1947, in New York City. The cast includes Marlon Brando as Stanley Kowalski, Kim Hunter as Stella, and Jessica Tandy as Blanche. AP/Press Association Images. Gillian Anderson as Blanche DuBois and Vanessa Kirby as Stella Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the Young Vic Theatre, London, UK; 2014 Credit : Nigel Norrington / ArenaPAL. *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the Guthrie; Photo credit © T Charles Erickson tcharlesericksen@photoshelter.com. *A Streetcar Named Desire* set concept by William Dudley (© William Dudley)

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Dancing at a juke joint near Clarksdale, Mississippi, in 1939 New Orleans downtown street, Louisiana c. December 1935 © Public Domain; Felix's Bar and Restaurant – New Orleans, La. Created/Published: Nationwide Advertising Specialty Co; San Francisco plantation home near Reserve Louisiana in 1938: State Library of Louisiana Historic Photograph Collection

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

This photocopiable resource is intended for advanced level students of English literature and language & literature. It provides resources and activities to support students in exploring and analysing *A Streetcar Named Desire* as a literary text and as a drama script in production.

The material is divided into:

- Before reading
- Activities on each scene to support a reading of the whole play
- After reading
- Resources and additional reading

The play is set in its literary, generic and historic context, with activities to support students in using this contextual knowledge effectively. There is a particular focus on New Orleans and the American South, Williams' 'plastic theatre' and the first production, all of which are used to illuminate the play. Critical material is used throughout the resource to sharpen up students' own responses and to suggest new ways of interpreting the text.

The material draws on literary, stylistic and creative approaches to critical analysis, providing ways of engaging with the play's structure, language, characterisation and dramatic qualities, as well as its themes and ideas.

Throughout the resource students are encouraged to balance close analysis of individual scenes, with a sense of the play as a whole, its development, structure and shape.

In the Resources section (pages 92-95) key aspects of the play are presented as cards, with ideas for how to use them for revision. They can also be used during reading as students investigate themes, symbols and motifs, the play's structure or Williams' use of music.

Finally, on page 96 there is a list of the texts which have proved particularly useful in preparing this publication. Teachers and students wanting to follow up extracts included in this resource or pursue their interest in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Williams' dramatic art more generally will find them interesting and illuminating. There is also a list of the articles currently available (February 2016) in *emagazine*, the English and Media Centre's subscription website for advanced level students.

A note on the text

Extracts and quotations from *A Streetcar Named Desire* are taken from the Penguin Classics edition (2000) edited by E. Martin Browne.

Notes on activities

'Taking a leaf out of Blanche's notebook – analysing the dialogue' (page 75)

The snippets of dialogue are spoken by the following characters:

1.	Blanche	9.	Blanche	17.	Stella
2.	Stanley	10.	Stanley	18.	Stanley
3.	Eunice	11.	Blanche	19.	Stanley
4.	Stanley	12.	Eunice	20.	Stella)
5.	Eunice	13.	Stella	21.	Blanche
6.	Blanche	14.	Stella	22.	Blanche
7.	Blanche	15.	Stanley	23.	Eunice
8.	Stella	16.	Stella	24.	Eunice

BEFORE READING

An Introduction to Tennessee Williams' Drama

Tennessee Williams was a mid-20th century American playwright. His first full-length play *The Glass Menagerie* was staged to great acclaim in 1945. His second, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, was first performed in 1947, running for 855 performances on Broadway and winning three prestigious awards for theatre – the Pulitzer, Donaldson and New York Drama Critics' Circle – the first play to do so.

The plays

Extracts from four of Williams' most popular and successful plays are included below and on pages 6-8.

- In pairs or small groups, read the extracts out loud. Talk about anything which particularly strikes you about them as play texts.

You might think about:

- subject matter
- characters
- use of stage directions
- language.

- Pool your ideas about the sort of playwright Williams seems to be and the drama you would expect him to create.

A Streetcar Named Desire (1947)

STELLA: Belle Reve? Lost, is it? No!

BLANCHE: Yes, Stella.

[*They stare at each other across the yellow-checked linoleum of the table. BLANCHE slowly nods her head and Stella looks slowly down at her hands folded on the table. The music of the 'blue piano' grows louder. BLANCHE touches her handkerchief to her forehead.*]

STELLA: But how did it go? What happened?

BLANCHE [*springing up*]: You're a fine one to ask me how it went!

STELLA: Blanche!

BLANCHE: You're a fine one to sit there accusing me of it!

STELLA: Blanche!

BLANCHE: I, I, *I* took the blows in my face and my body! All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father, mother! Margaret, that dreadful way! So big with it, it couldn't be put in a coffin! But had to be burned like rubbish! You just came home in time for the funerals, Stella. And funerals are pretty compared to deaths. Funerals are quiet, but deaths – not always. Sometimes their breathing is hoarse, and sometimes it rattles, and sometimes they even cry out to you, 'Don't let me go!' Even the old, sometimes, say, 'Don't let me go.' As if you were able to stop them! But funerals are quiet, with pretty flowers. And, oh, what gorgeous boxes they pack them away in! Unless you were there at the bed when they cried out, 'Hold me!' you'd never suspect there was the struggle for breath and bleeding. You didn't dream, but I saw! Saw! Saw!

The Glass Menagerie (1945)

TOM: […] This is the social background of the play.

[*Music*]

The play is memory.

Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic.

In memory everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fiddle in the wings

I am the narrator of the play, and also a character in it. The other characters are my mother Amanda, my sister Laura, and a gentleman caller who appears in the final scenes.

He is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart from.

But since I have a poet's weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for.

There is a fifth character in the play who doesn't appear except in this larger-than-lifesize photograph over the mantel.

This is our father who left us a long time ago.

He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances; he gave up his job with the telephone company and skipped the light fantastic out of town…

The last we heard of him was a picture postcard from Mazatlan, on the Pacific coast of Mexico, containing a message of two words –

'Hello – Good-bye!' and no address.

I think the rest of the play will explain itself …

[*AMANDA'S voice becomes audible through the portieres.*

LEGEND ON SCREEN: 'OÙ SONT LES NEIGES'.

He divides the portieres and enters the upstage area.

AMANDA and LAURA are seated at a dropleaf table. Eating is indicated by gestures without food or utensils. AMANDA faces the audience TOM and LAURA are seated in profile.

The interior has lit up softly and through the scrim see AMANDA and LAURA seated at the table in the upstage area.]

Sweet Bird of Youth (1959)	
PAGEBOY	[*offstage*]: Paging Chance Wayne, Mr Chance Wayne, please.
PRINCESS	[*entering with PAGEBOY*]: Louder, young man, louder … Oh, never mind, here he is!
	[*But CHANCE has already rushed out on to the gallery. The PRINCESS looks as if she had thrown on her clothes to escape a building on fire. Her blue-sequinned gown is unzipped, or partially zipped, her hair is dishevelled, her eyes have a dazed, drugged brightness; she is holding up the eyeglasses with the broken lens, shakily, hanging on to her mink stole with the other hand; her movements are unsteady.*]
MISS LUCY:	I know who you are. Alexandra Del Lago.
	[*Loud whispering. A pause.*]
PRINCESS	[*on the step to the gallery*]: What? Chance!
MISS LUCY:	Honey, let me fix that zipper for you. Hold still just a second. Honey, let me take you upstairs. You mustn't be seen down here in this condition …
	[*CHANCE suddenly rushes in from the gallery: he conducts the PRINCESS outside: she is on the verge of panic. The PRINCESS rushes half-down the steps to the palm garden: leans panting on the stone balustrade under the ornamental light standard with its five great pearls of light. The interior is dimmed as CHANCE comes out behind her.*]
PRINCESS:	Chance! Chance! Chance! Chance
CHANCE	[*softly*]: If you'd stayed upstairs that wouldn't have happened to you.
PRINCESS:	I did, I stayed.
CHANCE:	I told you to wait.
PRINCESS:	I waited.
CHANCE:	Didn't I tell you to wait till I got back?
PRINCESS:	I did, I waited forever, I waited forever for you. Then finally I heard those long sad silver trumpets blowing through the palm garden and then – Chance, the most wonderful thing has happened to me. Will you listen to me? Will you let me tell you?

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955)

BRICK [*without interest*]: What are they up to, Maggie?

MARGARET: Why, you know what they're up to!

BRICK [*appearing*]: No, I don't know what they're up to.

[*He stands there in the bathroom doorway drying his hair with a towel and hanging onto the towel rack because one ankle is broken, plastered and bound. He is still slim and firm as a boy. His liquor hasn't started tearing him down outside. He has the additional charm of that cool air of detachment that people have who have given up the struggle. But now and then, when disturbed, something flashes behind it, like lightning in a fair sky, which shows that at some deeper level he is far from peaceful. Perhaps in a stronger light he would show some signs of deliquescence, but the fading, still warm, light from the gallery treats him gently.*]

MARGARET: I'll tell you what they're up to, boy of mine! – They're up to cutting you out of your father's estate, and –

[*She freezes momentarily before her next remark. Her voice drops as if it were somehow a personally embarrassing admission.*]

-Now we know that Big Daddy's dyin' of – cancer…

[*There are voices on the lawn below: long-drawn calls across distance. Margaret raises her lovely bare arms and powders her armpits with a light sigh.*

[*She adjusts the angle of a magnifying mirror to straighten an eyelash, then rises fretfully saying:*]

There's so much light in the room it –

BRICK [*softly but sharply*]: Do we?

MARGARET: Do we what?

BRICK: Know Big Daddy's dyin' of cancer?

MARGARET: Got the report today.

BRICK: Oh ...

MARGARET [*letting down bamboo blinds which cast long, gold-fretted shadows over the room*]: Yep, got th' report just now ... it didn't surprise me, Baby....

[*Her voice has range, and music; sometimes it drops low as a boy's and you have a sudden image of her playing boy's games as a child.*]

An Introduction to Naturalist and Expressionist Theatre – The Literary Context

Included here are extracts from two plays, both of which were considered groundbreaking at the time they were first staged.

- What strikes you about them on a first reading? In what ways are they similar? In what ways different? You could think about:
  - the type of subject matter
  - the setting and staging
  - the language of the characters
  - the stage directions and the language in which they are expressed.
- Is there anything which recalls the extracts you've looked at from Tennessee Williams' plays?

Play 1

A comfortable room, furnished inexpensively, but with taste. In the back wall there are two doors; that to the right leads out to a hall, the other, to the left, leads to Helmer's study. Between them stands a piano. In the middle of the left-hand wall is a door, with a window on its nearer side. Near the window is a round table with armchairs and a small sofa. In the wall on the right-hand side, rather to the back, is a door, and farther forward on this wall there is a tiled stove with a couple of easy chairs and a rocking-chair in front of it. Between the door and the stove stands a little table. There are etchings on the walls, and there is a cabinet with china ornaments and other bric-à-brac, and a small bookcase with handsomely bound books. There is a carpet on the floor, and the stove is lit. It is a winter day. […]

HELMER [*from his study*]: Is that my little skylark twittering out there?

NORA [*busy opening the parcels*]: It is.

HELMER: Scampering about like a little squirrel?

NORA: Yes.

HELMER: When did the squirrel get home?

NORA: Just this minute. [*She slips the bag of macaroons in her pocket and wipes her mouth.*] Come in here, Torvald, and you can see what I've bought.

HELMER: I'm busy! [*A moment later he opens the door and looks out, pen in hand.*] Did you say 'bought'? What, all that? Has my little featherbrain been out wasting money again?

NORA: But, Torvald, surely this year we can let ourselves go just a little bit? It's the first Christmas that we haven't had to economise.

HELMER: Still, we mustn't waste, you know.

NORA: Oh, Torvald, surely we can waste a little now – just the teeniest bit? Now that you're going to earn a big salary, you'll have lots and lots of money.

HELMER: After New Year's Day, yes – but there'll be a whole quarter before I get paid.

NORA: Pooh, we can always borrow till then.

HELMER: Nora! [*He goes to her and takes her playfully by the ear.*] The same little scatterbrain. Just suppose I borrowed a thousand kroner today and you went and spent it all by Christmas, and then on New Year's Eve a tile fell on my head, and there I lay –

NORA [*putting a hand over his mouth*]: Sh! Don't say such horrid things!

Play 2

The impression to be conveyed by this scene is one of the beautiful, vivid life of the sea all about – sunshine on the deck in a great flood, the fresh sea wind blowing across it. In the midst of this, these two incongruous, artificial figures, inert and disharmonious, the elder like a gray lump of dough touched up with rouge, the younger looking as if the vitality of her stock had been sapped before she was conceived, so that she is the expression not of its life energy but merely of the artificialities that energy had won for itself in the spending.

MILDRED [*Looking up with affected dreaminess.*]: How the black smoke swirls back against the sky! Is it not beautiful?

AUNT [*Without looking up.*]: I dislike smoke of any kind.

MILDRED My great-grandmother smoked a pipe – a clay pipe.

AUNT [*Ruffling.]:* Vulgar!

MILDRED She was too distant a relative to be vulgar. Time mellows pipes.

AUNT [*Pretending boredom but irritated.*]: Did the sociology you took up at college teach you that – to play the ghoul on every possible occasion, excavating old bones? Why not let your great-grandmother rest in her grave?

MILDRED [*Dreamily.*]: With her pipe beside her – puffing in Paradise.

AUNT [*With spite.*]: Yes, you are a natural born ghoul. You are even getting to look like one, my dear.

MILDRED [*In a passionless tone.*]: I detest you, Aunt. [*Looking at her critically.*] Do you know what you remind me of? Of a cold pork pudding against a background of linoleum tablecloth in the kitchen of a – but the possibilities are wearisome. [*She closes her eyes.*]

From realism to expressionism

The first extract (page 9) is from *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, the 19th-century Norwegian playwright. It's an example of a **realist or naturalist play**. It dramatises the ordinary lives of ordinary people in sets which look like the rooms they are supposed to represent. This was considered very radical when the play was first staged in 1872. In some ways realist drama of this sort resembles a soap opera today: actors and audience alike suspend their disbelief to pretend that what is taking place on stage is real life.

Here are some of the features and conventions associated with realist/naturalist drama.

Realist/naturalist drama and theatre

1. Plays should be as realistic as possible, creating an illusion of real life on stage.
2. Believable, everyday working/middle-class characters.
3. Set, props and costumes are realistic and believable.
4. Action is continuous between acts or scenes – no jumps in time and/or place.
5. No interaction between audience and actors.
6. Dialogue is that of everyday speech.
7. Plot is secondary to the inner lives of characters, their motives etc.
8. Plays explore sordid subject matter previously considered taboo on the stage in any serious manner (e.g. suicide, poverty, prostitution).
9. Characters shaped by (or victims of) their circumstances.
10. Acting that looks like real life.

(The terms realism and naturalism are often used interchangeably but some critics define naturalism as a heightened version of realism in which the playwright also tries to dramatise a psychological truth – a character's insecurities or disappointments, for example.)

The second extract (page 10) is from the American playwright Eugene O' Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922). It shows how playwrights began to experiment with theatrical devices, non-naturalistic staging and heightened language to dramatise the way an individual experienced a situation rather than represent it absolutely literally. This type of drama is known as **expressionism**.

Here are some of the key features and techniques of expressionist drama.

Expressionist drama and theatre

1. Expressing one's meaning is more important than being realistic.
2. Expressionistic devices are used to make the inner life (psychological state) clear to the audience.
3. Shadowy, unrealistic lighting and visual distortions in the set.
4. Abstract sets representing themes through shapes, colours and simplified images.
5. Only a very few symbolic props.
6. Episodic.
7. Character types, often named for their role, e.g. The Father.
8. Heightened lyrical, poetic style.
9. Long monologues, pauses/silences and clipped telegraph-like utterances instead of naturalistic dialogue.
10. Stylised exaggerated movements rather than naturalistic acting.

- As a class, think of a soap opera you know (for example, *EastEnders* or *Coronation Street*). Together talk about what difference it would make if a soap opera used the dramatic devices and techniques of expressionist drama.

Tennessee Williams – mixing realism and expressionism

American theatre of the 1930s and 40s saw playwrights, including Tennessee Williams, use techniques associated with *both* realist/naturalist *and* expressionist drama.

- Some aspects of a play might be grittily realistic/naturalistic – for instance, a grubby kitchen as a set.
- But the playwright might also choose to use very non-naturalistic theatrical devices (e.g. the lighting, music or elements of the staging) or language (e.g. poetic phrasing and extended speeches) to convey a different sort of reality.

Here's what Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan (the director of the first stage production and film) said about what they were trying to do.

> Bring this play to life exactly as if it were happening in life […] I don't necessarily mean 'realism'; sometimes a living quality is caught better by expressionism than what is supposed to be realistic treatment.
>
> *Letter from Tennessee Williams to Elia Kazan (1947)*

> This is a poetic tragedy, not a realistic, naturalistic one. The acting must be styled, not in the obvious sense. (Say nothing of this to the producer and actors.) […] One reason a 'style', a stylised production, is necessary is that Blanche's memories, inner life, emotions are a tangible, actual factor.
>
> *Elia Kazan: from the Notebooks (1947) in Kazan on Directing ed Robert Cornfield (2010)*

- As you explore the play, look out for the ways in which Williams draws on these different styles of drama and the contribution these choices make to the meaning and dramatic impact of the play.

New Orleans and the American South – An Introduction to the World of *A Streetcar Named Desire*

> 'America has only three cities: New York, San Francisco, and New Orleans. Everywhere else is Cleveland.'
>
> *Tennessee Williams*

Old South v. New World, the special case of New Orleans

The action of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is all set within the French Quarter (the *Vieux Carré*) of New Orleans in Louisiana, one of the 'Deep South' states of America. It is set soon after the end of World War 2, around the same time that it was written in 1946-7.

This is how Tennessee Williams describes it in the opening stage directions:

> *The exterior of a two-storey corner building on a street in New Orleans which is named Elysian Fields and runs between the L & N tracks and the river. The section is poor but, unlike corresponding sections in other American cities, it has a raffish charm. The houses are mostly white frame, weathered grey, with rickety outside stairs and galleries and quaintly ornamented gables. This building contains two flats, upstairs and down. Faded white stairs ascend to the entrances of both.*

Unseen but referred to throughout the play is another setting – Mississippi and the 'Deep South', a name which stands not simply for a geographical location but also for a set of values and a way of life. This 'South', shaped by a belief in history and family ancestry, is a place looking backwards to before the American Civil War of 1861-65 (the antebellum era) when white plantation owners had made fortunes from black slave labour. Although this life no longer really existed by the 1940s, there continued to be a romantic view of both the past and its decline – kept alive by the blockbuster smash *Gone With the Wind*, published in 1937 and made into a film in 1939.

Although a 'Deep South' city, New Orleans had little in common with these values and way of life. Urban, with a diverse, often immigrant population, it was a city with liberal (even risqué) values and morals, the home of jazz music, a place in which family name and ancestry had little weight. In the 1940s New Orleans was a place looking forward to the second half of the 20th century. It was the sort of place a playwright like Tennessee Williams, gay at a time when homosexuality was both illegal and considered a psychiatric disorder, might feel at home.

A Streetcar Named Desire brings together into a small one-bedroomed flat the values and beliefs associated with these two very different worlds. Knowing something of these places and the values associated with them will help you understand and enjoy your first experience of the play.

- Read the extracts about New Orleans (pages 14-15) and the American South (pages 16-17) and look at the images.
- Share your impressions.

Reading the play

- While reading *A Streetcar Named Desire*, think about:
  - the way in which the lifestyle and values of the Old South are dramatised
  - which characters are associated with the Old South and how they appear
  - the role New Orleans plays in the drama
  - the characters challenging the values of the Old South and how they appear.

New Orleans

Even though steamboats and sailing ships quickly connected French Louisiana to the rest of the country, New Orleans jealously guarded its own way of life. True, it became Dixie's[1] chief cotton and slave market, but it always remained a strange province in the American South. American newcomers from the South as well as the North recoiled when they encountered the prevailing French language of the city, its dominant Catholicism, its bawdy sensual delights, or its proud free black and slave inhabitants — in short, its deeply rooted Creole[2] or native population and their peculiar traditions. Rapid influxes of non-southern population compounded the peculiarity of its Creole past. [...] And to complicate its social makeup further, more foreign immigrants than Americans came to take up residence in the city almost until the beginning of the 20th century.

A stroll through any of the unique cemeteries, called 'the Cities of the Dead,' vividly show the multiplicity of names, birthplaces and languages of the various peoples who made up the population of the Crescent City.

New Orleans has remained an American province with a variant way of life. [...] Neither race nor nationality excludes any group from this common ground. What the city's denizens celebrate is less the Old World cultures of their ancestors and more the new way of life that evolved in New Orleans. The food, the festival, the music are shared pleasures, because somehow a novel ethnicity, born of the New World, has emerged in New Orleans.

Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, Department of History, University of New Orleans: http://www.neworleansonline.com/neworleans/history/people.html

[1] Dixie: a historical nickname for the southern states of America

[2] Creole: Louisiana Creole people are those who are descended from the colonial settlers of Louisiana, especially those of colonial French or Spanish descent. The term creole was originally used by French settlers to distinguish those born in Louisiana from those born in the mother country or elsewhere. As in many other colonial societies around the world, creole was a term used to mean those who were 'native-born'. (Wikipedia)

Through pestilence, hurricanes, and conflagrations the people continued to sing. They sang through the long oppressive years of conquering the swampland and fortifying the town against the ever threatening Mississippi. They are singing today. An irrepressible *joie de vivre* maintains the unbroken thread of music through the air. Yet, on occasion, if you ask an overburdened citizen why he is singing so gaily, he will give the time-honored reason, 'Why to keep from crying, of course!'

Lura Robinson: It's An Old New Orleans Custom (1948)

Everyone in this good city enjoys the full right to pursue his own inclinations in all reasonable and, unreasonable ways.

The Daily Picayune, New Orleans (March 5, 1851)

Times are not good here. The city is crumbling into ashes. It has been buried under taxes and frauds and maladministrations so that it has become a study for archaeologists […] but it is better to live here in sackcloth and ashes than to own the whole state of Ohio.

Lafcadio Hearn: Letter to a friend (1879)

To all men whose desire only is to be rich and to live a short life, but a merry one, I have no hesitation in recommending New Orleans.

Henry Bradshaw Fearon, Sketches of America (1919)

Felix's Bar and Restaurant -- New Orleans, La. Nationwide Advertising Specialty CoPublic Domain

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New Orleans downtown street, Louisiana" c. December 1935 © Public Domain


Dancing at a juke joint near Clarksdale, Mississippi, in 1939. Public Domain

The American South

The American South

The southern states of America (for example, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, North and South Carolina and Louisiana) were those which depended on plantation agriculture and slavery in the pre-Civil War era.

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The Civil War

The American Civil War (1861–65) was between the northern or Union states (i.e. the states which formed the United States of America and where the national or federal Government was based) and southern states, which, in February 1861, broke away from the Union to form the Confederate States of America (the Confederacy). The states of the Confederacy were North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Virginia, Tennessee, and Arkansas. The Confederacy fell after its army was defeated in 1865 and General Robert E Lee surrendered.

A key factor in the Civil War (although not the only one) was the issue of slavery, with the northern states supporting the abolition of slavery, on which plantation agriculture and the wealth of the plantation owners, depended.

EMC

Southern Belle

The southern belle (derived from the French word belle, 'beautiful') is a stock character representing a young woman of the American Deep South's upper socio-economic class.

The image of the southern belle developed in the South during the antebellum (pre Civil War) Period. It was based on the young, unmarried woman in the plantation-owning upper class of Southern society.

The image of a southern belle is often characterized by antebellum fashion elements, such as a hoop skirt, a corset, pantalettes, a wide-brimmed straw hat, and gloves. As signs of tanning were considered working-class and unfashionable during this era, parasol umbrellas and hand fans are also often represented.

Southern belles were expected to marry respectable young men, and become ladies of society dedicated to the family and community. The 'southern belle' archetype is characterised by southern hospitality, a cultivation of beauty, and a flirtatious yet chaste demeanor.

Wikipedia

Southern Belle, Civil War, Public Domain

Plantation Owners

Although slavery had been abolished in 1865 at the end of the Civil War, segregation was still legal. Plantations still relied on cheap black labour. The combination of the Great Depression, the 2nd World War, more liberal and progressive attitudes towards integration in the northern states all combined to threaten the wealth and way of life of plantation owners.

'It was always so hot, and everyone was so polite, and everything was all surface but underneath it was like a bomb waiting to go off. I always felt that way about the South, that beneath the smiles and southern hospitality and politeness were a lot of guns and liquor and secrets.'

James McBride: The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother (1995)

San Francisco plantation home near Reserve Louisiana in 1938
State Library of Louisiana Historic Photograph Collection

The Decline of the Old South

In the post war period there was a sense that the old South was dying and it was becoming like the rest of America, causing fear in the hearts of Southerners, as Flannery O'Connor said:

'The anguish that most have observed for some time now has been caused not by the fact that the South is alienated form the rest of the country, but by the fact that it is not alienated enough, that every day we are getting more and more like the rest of the country, that we are being forced out, not only of our many sins, but of our few virtues'.

Flannery O'Connor: 'The Fiction Writer and His Country' in Mystery and Manners (1957)

Views of the Old South

A sense of bitterness is said to have remained in the South after the civil war and it became isolated from the rest of the nation and strong and unified in itself due to this sense of isolation. The historian C Vann Woodward sees the southern identity as shaped by a failure to share in the great American traditions of 'success, affluence and innocence.' There was a sense of guilt carried over from slavery and it was viewed as 'the benighted South' – a land of racial prejudice, religious bigotry and poverty.

https://wisebloodunsw.wordpress.com/the-deep-south-in-the-1940s-and-1950s/

The South in Literature

During the early years of the nineteenth century, influenced in part by the historical romances of Sir Walter Scott, writers began to represent the plantation society of the South as an aristocracy modelled on the feudal system of lords, knights, and ladies with attending servants. Following the Civil War, this vision of a plantation South took on mythic proportions as southerners grew defensive and nostalgic about the Old South. In particular, the southern woman of the Old South was presented, through the image of the southern lady, as the ideal of nineteenth-century womanhood.

But being a totally admirable character, the southern lady was not a very enticing subject for storytelling. A marble figure on a pedestal, she was static. A more appealing character, in this idealised vision of the South was the southern belle, the younger, unmarried, and hence incomplete version of the southern lady. The lady was what the belle was supposed to grow up to be, and it was getting there that created action, tension and story.

Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda Hardwick: The Companion to Southern Literature (2002)

Speculating About the Play

1. People, places and key symbols

- Here is the character list for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. What do you notice?

The characters		
Blanche DuBois	Steve Hubbel	A Strange Woman [Nurse]
Stella Kowalski	Pablo Gonzales	A Young Collector
Stanley Kowalski	Negro Woman	A Mexican Woman
Harold Mitchell [Mitch]	A Strange Man [Doctor]	[Allan Grey – a young man referred to in the play but not present]
Eunice Hubbel	[School Principal – referred to in the play but not present]	

Here are all the places, both big and small, which play a part in the play.

- Again, share anything you notice. Draw on what you have learned about the context in which *A Streetcar Named Desire* is set (see pages 14-17).

The places			
Stella and Stanley's flat	The bedroom	New Orleans	The Flamingo Hotel
Eunice and Steve's flat	Blanche's put-up bed	Elysian Fields	Laurel [town in Mississippi]
The Bowling Club	The main room	The Mississippi River	
Galatoires [restaurant]	The bathroom	L & N tracks [railway]	
Four Deuces [club]	The balcony	Desire [end of train line]	
Belle Reve [the name of the DuBois family home]	The external staircase	Cemeteries [end of train line]	

One of the features of expressionist drama that Tennessee Williams makes use of is symbolism and metaphor.

Symbols are used as a shorthand – a way of representing a more complex set of meanings than the literal meaning of the actual object, colour or sound. (For example, the telephone is a means of keeping in touch – a way of communicating. A silent telephone on stage might come to represent isolation, lack of communication or disappointed hopes – a call expected but never received.)

Some of the most important symbols used in the play are listed below.

- Explore the possible meanings and associations of these words. What might they symbolise?

Symbols and motifs			
Blue piano	Light	Bathing	Drums, clarinet, trumpet
Alcohol	Moths	The sound of a streetcar	The music of the polka
Letters	Poker [& card games]	Sight/blindness	Animals [apes & pigs]
The colour red	Blanche's trunk	Telephone	The colour white
Furs, feathers, costume jewellery	Children/babies	Belle Reve	Silk clothing

- As you read, be aware of these symbols and the way they are used in the dialogue and stage directions. (For examples, is a symbol associated with a particular character or used to conjure up a particular mood?)

SCENE 1

Before Reading

Setting the scene

A distinctive feature of Tennessee Williams' drama is his long, detailed and expressionistic stage directions. The first stage direction from the beginning of Scene 1 is printed in the box below. This stage direction includes some factual information about the set and what is happening on stage (for example, there are two women sitting on the steps of the building). But it also includes descriptions which set the scene in less tangible ways – painting a visual and aural picture, much more like you'd get in a novel.

- Read the stage direction.
- In pairs, highlight words and phrases which seem to you particularly important in establishing the world of the play. What mood is evoked? Are any themes or ideas introduced in this direction?

Unlike a reader of the play, the audience never experiences Williams' stage direction exactly as he wrote it. An audience only experiences it as it is brought to life on stage by the director, set designer and actor.

The images on page 20 show the set from four different productions.

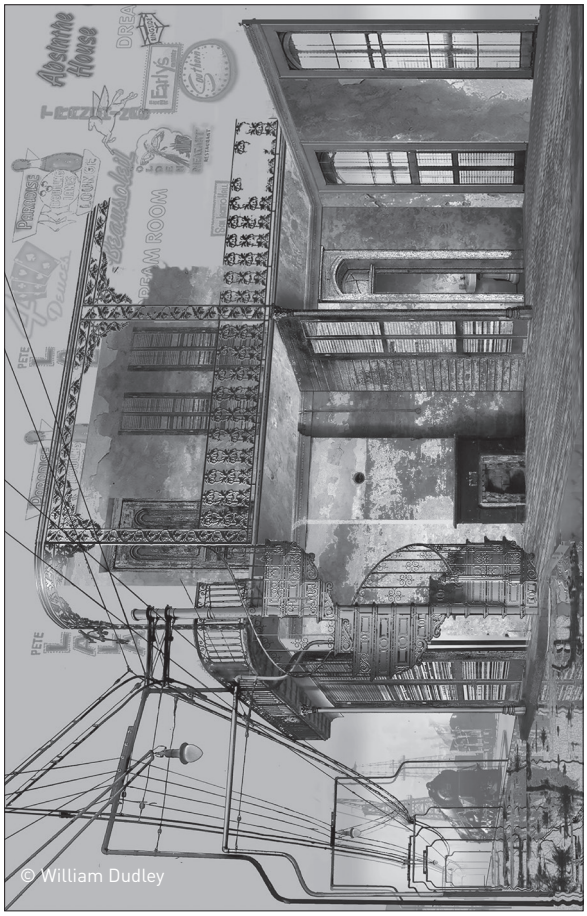
- Share your reactions.
  - How well do these sets capture for you Tennessee Williams' opening stage directions?
  - What else would be needed to bring this world to life on stage?

(If you have looked at the material on naturalism and expressionism on pages 9-12, draw on these ideas in your discussion.)

The exterior of a two-storey corner building on a street in New Orleans which is named Elysian Fields and runs between the L & N tracks and the river. The section is poor but, unlike corresponding sections in other American cities, it has a raffish charm. The houses are mostly white frame, weathered grey, with rickety outside stairs and galleries and quaintly ornamented gables. This building contains two flats, upstairs and down. Faded white stairs ascend to the entrances of both. It is first dark of an evening early in May. The sky that shows around the dim white building is a peculiarly tender blue, almost turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully attenuates the atmosphere of decay. You can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river beyond the river warehouses with their faint redolences of bananas and coffee. A corresponding air is evoked by the music of Negro entertainers at a bar-room around the corner. In this part of New Orleans you are practically always just around the corner, or a few doors down the street, from a tinny piano being played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers. This 'blue piano' expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here.

[Two women, one white and one coloured, are taking the air on the steps of the building. The white woman is EUNICE, who occupies the upstairs flat; the coloured woman a neighbour, for New Orleans is a cosmopolitan city where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races in the old part of town.

Above the music of the 'blue piano' the voices of people on the street can be heard overlapping.]



© William Dudley

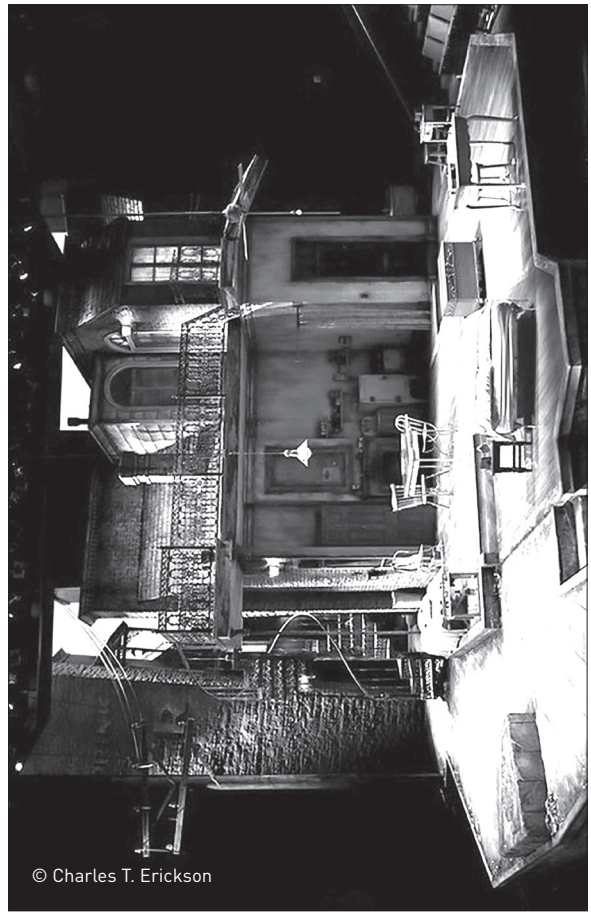

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Photo credit: Nigel Norring

The ingredients – speculation before reading

Here are some of the 'ingredients' in Scene 1.

- A younger sister
- An older sister
- The husband of the younger sister
- A one-bedroomed flat
- An unexpected visit
- A bottle of whisky
- A secret
- A confession
- A meeting
- A game of bowls
- The music of the 'blue piano' from a nearby jazz bar

- Talk about the following:
  - what you think will happen – share all the possibilities you can think of
  - what will be important in this scene (themes and ideas)
  - possible tensions.

- Now look at the short quotations below, all taken from Scene 1 and add to your ideas.

1. Don't waste your money in that clip joint!
2. *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.*
3. And turn that over-light off! Turn that off! I won't be looked at in this merciless glare!
4. You'll get along fine together, if you'll just try not to – well – compare him with men that we went out with at home.
5. When he's away for a week I nearly go wild!
6. Stop this hysterical outburst and tell me what's happened? What do you mean fought and bled? What kind of –
7. *The music of the 'blue piano' grows louder. Blanche touches her handkerchief to her forehead.*
8. I, I, *I* took the blows in my face and my body! All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father, mother! Margaret, that dreadful way! So big with it, it couldn't be put in a coffin! But had to be burned like rubbish!
9. And the old lady is on her way to Mass and she's late and there's a cop standin' in front of th'church an' she comes runnin' up and says, 'Officer – is Mass out yet?' He looks her over and says, 'No, Lady, but y'r hat's on crooked!' [*They give a hoarse bellow of laughter.*]
10. [*He grins at Blanche. She tries unsuccessfully to smile back. There is a silence.*] I'm afraid I'll strike you as being the unrefined type. Stella's spoke of you a good deal. You were married once, weren't you?

After Reading Scene 1

Recapping Scene 1

- Share your first response to this opening scene.
  - What do you think of it as an opening to a play?
  - How does it compare with your own speculations?

Scene 1, the longest in the play, covers a lot of ground: it sets the scene, introduces characters, establishes key relationships and gives some indication of themes that might be important.

- What stands out for you as most significant in this opening scene? Use the numbered summary below as a reminder of what happens but also consider anything striking about its *style*.

1. A glimpse of life in the area – a sailor on his way to the Four Deuces, a black woman and a white woman chatting together, a streetseller.
2. Stanley throws a package of meat at Stella his wife, who hurries after him to watch him and Mitch play bowls.
3. Blanche arrives having taken the streetcar from Desire to Cemeteries – she seems lost and disorientated and shocked at what she sees.
4. Eunice lets her into the flat and talks to Blanche about her family's plantation home – Belle Reve – in Mississippi.
5. Having sent Eunice off, Blanche helps herself to a drink while she waits for Stella – and then washes the glass.
6. Stella arrives.
7. The sisters talk about Blanche's visit.
8. Blanche tells Stella why she isn't still teaching school.
9. Stella talks about Stanley, the sort of man he is and their relationship.
10. Blanche tells Stella that she has 'lost' Belle Reve, their family home.
11. Stanley arrives back and introduces himself to Blanche.
12. He asks Blanche about her marriage and the scene ends with Blanche saying the 'boy died' and seeming to be overwhelmed by emotion.

Introducing Blanche, Stella and Stanley – key adjectives

Scene 1 introduces the three main characters: Blanche, Stella and Stanley. Williams describes each character in stage directions, reprinted here.

- Read the descriptions and share anything that strikes you about the way Williams portrays each character.
- For each character select three or four quotations from the play which you think reflect the image presented in the stage directions.

BLANCHE

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 ear-rings 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.

STELLA

STELLA comes out on the first-floor landing, a gentle young woman, about twenty-five, and of a background obviously quite different from her husband's.

STANLEY

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 attitudes. 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 women up at a glance, with sexual classifications, crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them.

Included below are some adjectives you might use to describe the three characters.

- In pairs, discuss which you would use to describe each character based on what you have read so far. (You can use each adjective more than once, if you want to.)

  - Confident
  - Assured
  - Domineering
  - Relaxed
  - Calm
  - Physical
  - Overwrought
  - Defensive
  - Happy/satisfied
  - Easily upset
  - Authoritative
  - Passive
  - Bossy
  - Sensual
  - Intellectual
  - Anxious
  - Quick tempered
  - Assertive

Stella and Blanche – a close look at their conversation

- Make a list of what you learn in Scene 1 about the sisters and why Blanche has now come to stay. For example:

> Stella is the younger sister who moved away from the family home.

- How would you describe the sisters and their relationship? Loving? Close? Tense? Competitive? What is it that gives you this impression? Look back into the scene and choose one or two exchanges which allow you to explain your interpretation.

One way of understanding how a dramatist creates a particular impression is to focus on the way the dramatic dialogue works as a conversation. So you might look at which character is given the longest turns, or directs the conversation or interrupts or uses exclamations and orders. Noticing these things allows you to talk very specifically about how your interpretation of the character (as domineering or confident, for example) is created. This activity gives you just a taste of this approach.

- In pairs, re-read the conversation between Blanche and Stella, from *'During the pause, Blanche stares at her. She smiles at Blanche'* to BLANCHE: ... But Stella, I don't see where you're going to put me!

- Share your impressions as a class.

Here are some of the things a critic using conversation analysis might identify as being of interest in this conversation.

- Which of these observations would help you explain your impression of the dialogue in a sharper way? Choose one or two and explain to a partner the reason for your choice.

1. The amount each character says.
2. The names Blanche uses to describe Stella compared to those Stella uses about her.
3. The way Blanche abruptly changes the direction of the conversation.
4. The way Stella responds to Blanche.
5. The number of exclamations and questions in what Blanche says.
6. The way Blanche tells Stella what to do.
7. The hesitations in Blanche's account of why she left the school.
8. Repetition in Blanche's speech (particularly about the number of rooms there are and where she will sleep).
9. Williams' stage directions to describe the way the two women speak: *sincerely*, *dutifully*, *wearily*.
10. The way Stella is shown responding to Blanche.

Structure – before Blanche's arrival

The play originally began with Blanche's arrival. The first lines, before Blanche's arrival, were added by Williams during rehearsals for the first production.

- What is the effect of opening the play with Stella and Stanley? Read the statements below and pick out one or two you find particularly interesting or persuasive. Share your choices in class discussion.

1. It establishes the relationship between Stella and Stanley.
2. It highlights Blanche's status as an intruder into the relationship.
3. It creates the sense of a world at ease with itself.
4. It makes Blanche seem even more out of place when she arrives.
5. It paints a picture of a noisy, lively, diverse place.
6. It establishes the importance of place as a 'character' in the play.
7. It immediately engages the audience's attention.
8. It helps convey Williams' first stage direction.

First thoughts on key themes

While a playwright might not set out deliberately to explore particular themes and ideas, all plays are about *something*. Themes are the ideas underlying the action – not what happens but what these actions mean, for example love, power, betrayal. Big themes such as these underlie a lot of plays – what's interesting is exploring both *what* a particular play says about the theme and *how* it is dramatised.

Included here are some of the things audiences and readers would say *A Streetcar Named Desire* is about – its underlying themes. Some of these only become apparent later in the action but some are clear from the very opening scene.

- In pairs, talk about which you can already recognise as underlying the action in Scene 1. Choose the two or three which seem most significant and explain why. Try to make what you say specific, with an example from the play.

Love	Sex	Death
Masculinity and femininity	Money	Ethnicity
Desire	Loneliness	Time (past/present/future)
Youth and age	Reality and illusion	Fantasy
Class	Madness	Identity
The South	Home	Family

SCENE 2

Before Reading

The loss of Belle Reve

Blanche and Stella DuBois grew up in Belle Reve, the family plantation home in Mississippi. Their family name, DuBois, comes from the French meaning 'of the wood'. The house name Belle Reve is also French. Although the translation isn't quite right, most people think Williams intended it to translate as 'Beautiful Dream'.

Making small talk when she lets Blanche into the house, Eunice reveals Stella has told her all about the house (passage 1, below). In Scene 1 Blanche tells Stella that the house has been 'lost' (passage 2, below).

- What do these two passages tell the audience about:
  - Blanche and Stella and their upbringing
  - what Belle Reve represents in their lives
  - the significance of the loss.

Passage 1

EUNICE: She showed me a picture of your home-place, the plantation.

BLANCHE: Belle Reve?

EUNICE: A great big place with white columns.

BLANCHE: Yes…

EUNICE: A place like that must be awful hard to keep up.

Passage 2

BLANCHE: I stayed and struggled! You came to New Orleans and looked out for yourself! I stayed at Belle Reve and tried to hold it together! I'm not meaning this in a reproachful way, but all the burden descended on my shoulders.

STELLA: The best I could do was make my own living, Blanche.

[*BLANCHE begins to shake again with intensity.*]

BLANCHE: I know, I know. But you are the one that abandoned Belle Reve, not I! I stayed and fought for it, bled for it, almost died for it!'

STELLA: Stop this hysterical outburst and tell me what's happened? What do you mean fought and bled? What kind of – ?

BLANCHE: I knew you would, Stella. I knew you would take this attitude about it!

STELLA: About – what? – Please!

BLANCHE [*slowly*]: The loss, the loss …

STELLA: Belle Reve? Lost, is it? No!

BLANCHE: Yes, Stella.

[*They stare at each other across the yellow-checked linoleum of the table. BLANCHE slowly nods her head and STELLA looks slowly down at her hands folded on the table. The music of the 'blue piano' grows louder. BLANCHE touches her handkerchief to her forehead.*]

Speculating about Scene 2

Scene 2 is divided into three clear sections:

- a conversation between Stella and Stanley
- a conversation between Stanley and Blanche
- the arrival of Stanley's friends to play poker and the departure of Blanche and Stella for their evening out.

- Together speculate about how you think Scene 2 will develop.

During Reading Scene 2

Stella and Stanley

The following activities require you to read the scene in stages.

- Read the conversation between Stella and Stanley down to STANLEY: You're damn tootin' I'm going to stay here. Pause when you get to the end of this conversation (where Stella goes out on to the porch and Blanche enters).

- In pairs, use the prompts below to help you talk about what is going on in this conversation (challenging the ideas in the prompts if you want to).

The conversation…

1. … presents a different view of Stella – she can hold her own with Stanley.
2. … raises the importance of money.
3. … highlights the differences between Stella and Stanley's backgrounds.
4. … suggests Stella is caught between Blanche and Stanley.
5. … reveals the increasing tensions in the flat.
6. … suggests Blanche is unaware of the effect she is having.
7. … suggests the loss of Belle Reve is the trigger for Stanley's antagonism towards Blanche.
8. … reveals Stella has a good understanding of her sister's character.
9. … highlights the pace of developments – Scene 2 takes place the evening after Blanche's arrival.
10. … sets up a confrontation between Stanley and Blanche (who is unaware of what is happening).
11. … suggests that the world Blanche comes from has been lost, along with Belle Reve, in favour of Stanley's world in which the family house represents only money.
12. … reveals the limits of Stanley's knowledge and power in the household.

- Which of these do you think is likely to prove most significant in the development of the drama? What do you think has most potential for creating drama? Pick your top three to share in class discussion.

Although the action takes place in Stella and Stanley's home, Williams does not show them together on stage for any length of time until this conversation at the beginning of Scene 2.

- Still working in pairs, read the conversation again, this time out loud. (If you have space, stand up to do this so that you get some sense of where the characters are in relation to each other.)
- What do you learn about the characters of Stella and Stanley and their relationship? What is it in Williams' writing that has conveyed this to you? Use the table below to record your ideas – an example has been filled in for Stanley to show you the sort of analysis you're aiming for here.
- Feed back your ideas in class discussion.

What have you learned about:	What in Williams' writing gives this impression?
... the character of Stella	
... the character of Stanley	Swaggering, belligerent, but maybe aware that he is not as educated as Stella. Trying to sound knowledgeable (and threatening). Stanley's dialogue is dominated by dialect terms, slang and non-Standard English so the words 'acquaintance' and 'appraisal' which are of a different register are foregrounded both because they are different and because they are repeated.
... their relationship	
... the attitude of each towards Blanche	

Blanche and Stanley

As Stella goes out onto the porch, Blanche enters from the bathroom where she has been bathing. Stanley and Blanche are now alone on stage.

- Before reading Williams' dialogue, talk about the conversation you imagine the two characters might have. What do you think is of most concern to each character? What is their agenda? As a class, come up with two or three concerns for each character. One possibility has been given for both Blanche and Stanley, to get you started:

> Blanche: To come across as a well-bred young woman
> Stanley: To establish his authority

- As a class, share your ideas about what each character wants. Record these on the whiteboard.
- Working in pairs, read as far as Blanche's comment 'I said to myself – 'My sister has married a man!' – Of course that was all I could tell about you.'
- In role as the character you have been playing, explain what you think is going on in this conversation. You could use the opening lines suggested here, if you want to.

> Blanche: I think the way to a man's heart is to be charming – and flatter him. That's the way I was brought up.
> Stanley: I won't be bamboozled by her pretty looks and clever talk.

- Use your role-play work to discuss the way Williams uses the characters' different agendas and perspectives to develop the tension and create a sense of drama.

The next few lines mark a significant shift in the conversation.

STANLEY [*booming*]: Now let's cut the re-bop!

BLANCHE [*pressing hands to her ears*]: Ouuuuu!

STELLA [*calling from the steps*]: Stanley! You come out here and let Blanche finish dressing!

BLANCHE: I'm through dressing, honey.

STELLA: Well, you come out, then.

STANLEY: Your sister and I are having a little talk.

BLANCHE [*lightly*]: Honey, do me a favour. Run to the drugstore and get me a lemon-coke with plenty of chipped ice in it! – Will you do that for me, Sweetie?

STELLA [*uncertainly*]: Yes. [*She goes around the corner of the building.*]

BLANCHE: The poor little thing was out there listening to us, and I have an idea she doesn't understand you as well as I do… All right; now, Mr. Kowalski, let us proceed without any more double-talk. I'm ready to answer all questions. I've nothing to hide. What is it?

- What happens here? How do you anticipate the second part of the conversation developing?

Blanche claims they will now 'proceed without any more double talk': the two characters will be straight with each other in a way they have not been so far.

- Continue reading to the end of their conversation (BLANCHE: I didn't know she was going to have a baby!). How does the second part of their conversation compare to the first? In what ways is it similar? How is it different?

After Reading Scene 2

A scene in 'two duets'

The critic Felicia Hardison Londré describes Scene 2 as 'compris[ing] two sequences, both 'duets', one between Stella and Stanley, followed by one between Stanley and Blanche.'

- As a class, share your thoughts on describing the scene in this way. Is it helpful to think of its structure as a duet?

Shifting power relationships – an active exploration

Some critics argue that the play is all about a battle between Stanley and Blanche for Stella and her support.

Work in threes, with one person playing Blanche and one playing Stanley. A third person represents Stella (not actually on stage during this conversation), as a silent presence throughout the scene.

- Re-play the conversation between Stanley and Blanche from BLANCHE: The poor little thing was out there listening to us. As Blanche and Stanley speak, Stella should move towards the character she thinks has the upper hand or is exerting the most powerful influence.

- Together reflect on the choices 'Stella' made: what in the text influenced her decision? Do those playing Blanche and Stanley agree with her choices?

Naturalist and expressionist drama – reflecting on the first two scenes

If you haven't already, read the information on realist/naturalist and expressionist drama on pages 9-12.

- With this information in mind, look back over the first two scenes and identify:
  - three things which you'd identify as belonging to naturalist/realist drama
  - three things which draw on the techniques of expressionism or anything which seems to cross the line between naturalism and expressionism.

- Share your choices as a class and talk about what each of these dramatic strands adds to the play. The examples on page 31 show you the sort of thing you might discuss.

Realist/naturalist	Expressionist	Both expressionist and naturalist
Arguments which mimic everyday speech – including the interruptions, the false starts and hesitations and so on.	The heightened language in Blanche's long monologue on death in Scene 1.	Blue piano: On the one hand the blue piano, from the bar round the corner, belongs in the world of the play. But it also seems to be used to reflect something of the emotional temperature of the scene, perhaps to indicate rising tensions.

Themes and symbols

- Look again at the themes you chose as being important in Scene 1. Would you make the same choices for Scene 2? Or have other themes become more significant? (Feel free to flesh out the themes. For example, you might feel that 'Family' is important but that it doesn't really capture the complexity of what's going on in this scene – you might want to add 'conflicting loyalties'.)

Before starting to read the play you may have looked at some of the symbols and images Tennessee Williams develops in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. These are reproduced below.

- Which of these do you recognise as playing a part in Scene 2?

Blue piano	Light	Bathing
Alcohol	Moths	The sound of a streetcar [tram]
Letters	Poker [card games]	Sight/blindness
The colour red	Blanche's trunk	Telephone
Silk clothing	Children/babies	Belle Reve
Animals [e.g. apes and pigs]	Drums, clarinet, trumpet	The colour white
Furs, feathers, costume jewellery	The music of the polka	

Symbols can fulfil a range of functions in drama:

- a way of dramatising the themes
- a way of visualising opposing beliefs, values and world-views
- a way of developing character
- a way of expressing an inner truth or emotional experience.

In practice, a symbol is likely to do more than one of these things, helping to knit together the events, themes, characters and so on.

The following notes on the symbol of the chest in Scene 2 shows you this in practice.

Blanche's 'trunk'

Stanley assumes the trunk contains money – from the sale of Belle Reve – that Blanche is defrauding him of. For Stanley it symbolises everything that the old privileged class is denying him. In fact, as he soon discovers, it contains clothes (which Stella identifies as being old or fake or cheap), worthless costume jewellery and love letters.

For Blanche it represents her life – everything that is important to her is in it. It's filled with clothes typical of a genteel southern young lady preparing for marriage. So you might also say it stands for a whole way of life (and one that no longer exists) where a young woman's greatest concern is to be polite and charming in order to 'catch' an eligible young man.

For both characters it could be said to represent an old, out-dated, perhaps even fraudulent, way of life.

- Have a go at writing about one of the other symbols you picked out as being important in this scene.

SCENE 3

Before Reading the Scene

The Poker Night

This scene is the only one which is given its own title. It's a title which Williams considered using for the whole play. In Scene 1 Williams has the men talk about where their poker game will take place. Stanley says it's happening at Mitch's, but Mitch has a sick mother so that's no good. Stanley agrees to be the host.

This little exchange at the beginning of the play reminds us that Williams has made a deliberate decision to dramatise the poker game. He could have chosen to have it happen off-stage, dramatising Stella and Blanche's evening in the flat instead.

Here are some of the possible meanings and associations poker has in the real world:

- gambling
- a game of both skill and chance
- 'poker face' – to be able to lie or deceive without letting it show on your face
- high risk
- a ritualistic game which is also aggressively competitive – though this aggression is concealed
- bluffing
- a very masculine game – poker dens were not places where women were welcome
- a game which is associated with both the upper and working classes.

- Why do you think Williams introduces Stanley's poker here, at the beginning of Scene 3? Use the ideas above to help you think about the opportunities a poker game might offer a dramatist.

Setting the scene

As the scene opens, Stanley and his three friends are well into their evening of drinking and poker playing. Blanche and Stella are about to return from their evening out.

This is how Williams sets the scene:

> *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 colors. 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 portieres and through the wide window on the street.*
>
> [*For a moment, there is absorbed silence as a hand is dealt.*]

The action takes place in the same setting as for Scenes 1 and 2 but the atmosphere suggested by the stage direction is very different.

- Using what you have learned so far about expressionist drama and Williams' use of symbolism, annotate the direction with your ideas about the possible significance of the description. What mood is Williams creating here? What themes is he alerting his audience to?

Reading Scene 3

Shifts in focus – exploring the structure of the scene

Within Scene 3 there are several shifts in focus – the moments at which in a film, there might be a cut, or fade to black. These are almost like 'micro' scenes.

- As you read the scene, look out for points of change which might signal the beginning of a new 'micro' scene. When you've read the whole scene, make a list of the micro scenes you have identified.

Some expressionist playwrights used a technique from the era of silent films – a caption or title visible to the audience – as a way of summing up or crystallising an aspect of the play.

- For each of your micro scenes identify:
  - the mood (for example, overwrought, laid-back, happy, tense)
  - the themes or ideas it dramatises (for example, loneliness, desire)
  - key images or symbols (for example, whisky bottle, the light).

Then come up with a caption which captures what you think is most important about the micro scene.

Line references	Mood	Key themes	Key images	Caption

- Look over your notes and consider the following questions:
  - What connections can you find between the different sections of this scene?
  - Are connections made though the mood created or the themes dramatised?

Make notes for yourself, then select one or two points you find particularly interesting to feed back in class discussion.

Southern belles and alpha males – exploring masculinity and femininity

The audience has now seen Blanche in conversation with her sister Stella, with Stanley and with Mitch. In each case she seems consciously to be creating a particular image of herself.

- Look back over the first three scenes and pick out one quotation from each that shows Blanche presenting herself in a particular way.

Scene	Quotation	Comment
Scene 1		
Scene 2		
Scene 3		

- Read this description of the 'southern belle' and share your response to it. (For example, does it seem to describe a real person, an ideal, a character type or an act a person might put on?)

> If trained right, the belle had, by her early teen years, already acquired most of the makings of the southern lady: she was beautiful or potentially beautiful, graceful, charming, virtuous, loyal to family, submissive to father, in need of men's protection, yet resourceful and brave when unusual circumstances called on her to be. But even into her late teens, she might not yet have perfected self-sacrifice and calm self-possession. These characteristics would come, or must come, once she married – and marrying was supposed to be her goal in life. That being so, the belle was allowed a few additional characteristics that might aid her in pursuit of a good husband but that she would have to abandon once she got him: she could be innocently flirtatious, winsome, spirited, haughty, spunky, mischievous, impulsive. It was chiefly these little liberties, and the lack of a husband to serve and a household to manage that separated the belle from the lady.
>
> *Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda Hardwick: The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People (2002)*

The name and the image of the southern belle has its origins in the Deep South states of pre-Civil War America. By the 1930s and 40s, the whole idea was outdated although the novel and film *Gone With the Wind* had revived it as a romantic, nostalgic ideal. Blanche is often described as a southern belle.

- How well does the description above fit Williams' characterisation of Blanche? What insights does it give you into Blanche's self-presentation and Stanley's reaction to her behaviour?

Included on pages 36-37 is an extract from Blanche's conversation with Stanley in Scene 2 and with Mitch in Scene 3. The two extracts have been laid out side by side so that you can see at a glance the difference between the two conversations.

- Before reading them, look across the two conversations. What jumps out at you?
- In pairs, read the two conversations out loud, paying attention to:
  - the way Blanche presents herself in each case
  - the way Stanley and Mitch react to her self-presentation.

BLANCHE AND STANLEY (Scene 2)	
BLANCHE:	… How do I look?
STANLEY:	You look all right.
BLANCHE:	Many thanks! Now the buttons!
STANLEY:	I can't do nothing with them.
BLANCHE:	You men with your big clumsy fingers. May I have a drag on your cig?
STANLEY:	Have one for yourself.
BLANCHE:	Why, thanks!... It looks like my trunk has exploded.
STANLEY:	Me an' Stella were helping you unpack.
BLANCHE:	Well, you certainly did a fast and thorough job of it!
STANLEY:	It looks like you raided some stylish shops in Paris.
BLANCHE:	Ha-ha! Yes – clothes are my passion!
STANLEY:	What does it cost for a string of fur-pieces like that?
BLANCHE:	Why, those were a tribute from an admirer of mine!
STANLEY:	He must have had a lot of – admiration!
BLANCHE:	Oh, in my youth I excited some admiration. But look at me now! [*She smiles at him radiantly*] Would you think it possible that I was once considered to be – attractive?
STANLEY:	Your looks are okay.
BLANCHE:	I was fishing for a compliment, Stanley.

BLANCHE AND MITCH (Scene 3)	
BLANCHE:	I'm sure you belong in the second category.
MITCH:	Deal me out I'm talking to Miss –
BLANCHE:	DuBois.
MITCH:	Miss DuBois?
BLANCHE:	It's a French name. It means woods and Blanche means white, so the two together mean white woods. Like an orchard in spring! You can remember it by that.
MITCH:	You're French?
BLANCHE:	We are French by extraction. Our first American ancestors were French Huguenots.
MITCH:	You are Stella's sister, are you not?
BLANCHE:	Yes, Stella is my precious little sister. I call her little in spite of the fact she's somewhat older than I. Just slightly. Less than a year. Will you do something for me?
MITCH:	Sure. What?
BLANCHE:	I bought this adorable little coloured paper lantern at a Chinese shop on Bourbon. Put it over the light bulb! Will you, please?
MITCH:	Be glad to.
BLANCHE:	I can't stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action.
MITCH	[*adjusting the lantern*]: I guess we strike you as being a pretty rough bunch.
BLANCHE:	I'm very adaptable – to circumstances.

STANLEY: I don't go in for that stuff.

BLANCHE: What – stuff?

STANLEY: Compliments to women about their looks. I never met a woman that didn't know if she was good-looking or not without being told, and some of them give themselves credit for more than

they've got. I once went out with a doll who said to me, 'I am the glamorous type, I am the glamorous type!' I said, 'So what?'

BLANCHE: And what did she say then?

STANLEY: She didn't say nothing. That shut her up like a clam.

BLANCHE: Did it end the romance?

STANLEY: It ended the conversation – that was all. Some men are took in by this Hollywood glamour stuff and some men are not.

MITCH: Well, that's a good thing to be. You are visiting Stanley and Stella?

BLANCHE: Stella hasn't been so well lately, and I came down to help her for a while. She's very run down.

MITCH: You're not –?

BLANCHE: Married? No, no. I'm an old maid schoolteacher!

MITCH: You may teach school but you're certainly not an old maid.

BLANCHE: Thank you, sir! I appreciate your gallantry!

MITCH: So you are in the teaching profession?

BLANCHE: Yes. Ah, yes...

MITCH: Grade school or high school or –

STANLEY [*bellowing*]: Mitch!

MITCH: Coming!

BLANCHE: Gracious, what lung-power!

Scene 3 brings into the foreground ideas signalled as significant from the very opening lines of the play: Williams' dramatisation of masculinity, femininity, sexuality and power.

Here are some of the ways these big themes are brought to life on stage in Scene 3.

1. The poker game, with the drinking, crude jokes and aggressive friendship.
2. Blanche's concern about her appearance – her 'freshness'.
3. The introduction of Mitch – a man who looks after his mother.
4. Blanche's questioning Stella about Mitch who she regards *with a certain interest.*
5. Mitch's story of the girl who died and the cigarette case he carries.
6. The battle over the radio.
7. The way Stanley and Mitch are presented.
8. The way Stella and Blanche are presented.
9. Stanley's attack on Stella.
10. The reaction of the men to Stanley's attack.
11. The reaction of the women to Stanley's attack.
12. Stanley's sobbing for Stella ('My baby doll's left me') and his *baying hound* bellow 'Stellaaaaaaaah'.
13. Blanche's horrified reaction to Stanley's violence – and Stella's response.
14. Williams' stage directions to describe Stella's return to Stanley.
15. Mitch's comment on both Stella and Stanley's relationship and on what matters in the Quarter.

- What is Williams saying here about:
  - masculinity
  - femininity
  - sexuality
  - power
  - relationships?
- How does what happens in this scene build on what we've seen in the first two scenes? Look back, for example, at the conversation between Stella and Blanche in Scene 1 and between Blanche and Stanley in Scene 2.

'They're crazy about each other' – Stella and Stanley

At the centre of Scene 3 is Stanley's physical and verbal attack on Stella.

- Re-read the section from [*Stanley stalks fiercely through the portières into the bedroom...*] to the end of the scene. In pairs share your reaction to what happens on (and off) stage.
- Together explore your views of what Williams is saying in this episode about:
  - sex, violence, power
  - masculinity and femininity and relationships between men and women.
- How does Williams use drama to explore these ideas? Use the prompts below help you think about this:
  - the combination of dialogue and action described through the stage directions
  - the language used by the different characters, along with Williams' description of the way the lines should be spoken (e.g. lovingly)
  - the use of music
  - the use of the stage space and props (bathroom, stairs, bedroom, telephone).

Conflict – at the heart of drama

Stella and Stanley's row (and particularly the physical attack) dramatises conflict in a very visible way. But dramatic conflict needn't be restricted to disagreements or fights between individuals. It may be conflicting belief systems or an internal conflict within an individual. Conflict in drama is often seen in oppositions.

Some of the oppositions encountered so far in *A Streetcar Named Desire* are listed below.

- Male/female
- Upper class/lower class
- Light/dark
- American/other nationality
- Superiority/inferiority
- Truth/lie
- Pretence/straightforward honest behaviour
- Reality/fantasy
- Past/present
- Story-telling/straight-talking
- Power/dependence
- Stanley/Blanche
- Stanley/Mitch
- Stella/Blanche
- Death/desire
- Romance/sex

- In pairs, discuss whether any of these oppositions have so far been the site of conflict. Are any of the oppositions linked to the *way* in which Williams dramatises conflict?
- Choose the opposition you think is most significant in the play so far and explain why.

SCENE 4

Scene 4 takes place early in the morning after the poker night. It opens with an image of Stella in bed.

- Read the stage direction and use the following prompts to talk about it:
  - its dramatic function and impact as the opening of a scene
  - the way it draws on opposing stereotypes of women: whore and mother-to-be
  - the significance of the word 'narcotised'
  - the different image it creates of Stella from the one Blanche attempts to create in Scene 1 (for example, 'messy child').

> *It is early the following morning. There is a confusion of street cries like a choral chant.*
>
> *[Stella is lying down in the bedroom. Her face is serene in the early morning sunlight. One hand rests on her belly, rounding slightly with new maternity. From the other dangles a book of coloured comics. Her eyes and lips have that almost narcotised tranquillity that is in the faces of Eastern idols.]*

- Read the scene through once. Make brief notes both on what the scene is about and the way Williams develops it. You might find it helpful to think about the different sections listed here.
  - The picture created of Stella in the stage directions
  - Blanche's entry
  - The sisters' discussion of Stanley, and Stella and Stanley's relationship
  - The sisters' talk of desire, lust and sex
  - Blanche's admission that it is desire, lust and sex that has brought her to New Orleans
  - Blanche's outburst, overheard by Stanley

Haven't you ever ridden on that Streetcar? Stella, Blanche and sex

In Scene 1, Blanche tells Stella 'I never had your beautiful self control.' Yet Stella tells Blanche that when Stanley is away for two weeks she goes 'almost wild'. In Scene 2 Stella urges Stanley to compliment Blanche on her appearance – 'That's important with Blanche'. Mitch reassures Blanche in Scene 3 that 'There's nothing to be scared of', Stanley and Stella are 'crazy about each other'.

Williams is building up a complex picture of the two women and the similarities and differences in their values and behaviours. In Scene 4 he places them on stage alone to talk about Stanley, Stella's relationship with him and sex.

- In pairs, re-read from the beginning of the scene to STELLA: I wish you'd just let things go, at least, for a while…
- Choose five or six short quotations from this section that you think are particularly revealing of:
  - Williams' dramatisation of Stella and Blanche
  - his exploration of masculinity, femininity and sexuality.
- Now read from 'Stella, I can't live with him!' to the end of the scene and share your ideas about what Williams is doing in this scene.
- Included on page 41 are five critical readings of the scene. What do you think of them? Are they interesting? Convincing? Talk about the ideas each raises, then use them and your own ideas to write a paragraph or two about Scene 4, the themes it raises and the way it works dramatically.

1.	This scene gets to the heart of the play: it's all about sex. And in this play sex is going to cause trouble. Blanche's admission that Stanley is a man 'to go out with – once – twice – three times when the devil is in you' and her wild monologue on his bestial nature ring alarm bells: her attraction to Stanley and her fear of that attraction is obvious. It feels very dangerous.

2.	This scene in which the two women talk about desire and lust foregrounds the play's exploration of female sexuality. And it's a complex exploration: Blanche's self-presentation as the young demure southern belle, her use of her looks and sexuality to exert power, her hysterical response to Stanley's attack on Stella and her admission of the power of 'brutal desire' are set against Stella's 'narcotised' acceptance of masculine aggression, her thrilling in Stanley's violence, her open pleasure in her own sexuality and her impending 'maternity'.

3.	Only present at the very end and never seen by the two women, Stanley nonetheless dominates this scene. Critics have argued that the play is driven by Stanley and Blanche's rivalry for the loyalty and love of Stella. But this scene suggests that any conflict will be between the two sisters for Stanley.

4.	This scene is more about delusion than sex or passion. In comparison to Blanche, Stella appears calm, reasonable, pragmatic – Blanche comments she is 'matter of fact' while Stella highlights Blanche's excitability. Stella presents herself as clear-sighted while by Scene 4 the audience is aware of Blanche's tendency to self-delusion (her drinking, her age, her presentation of herself as a young girl). Yet in this scene Stella shows herself just as deluded – as implied by Williams' stage direction 'narcotised'.

5.	The scene draws the audience's attention to the play's use of symbolism: the streetcar named Desire which literally brought Blanche to the flat is given symbolic meaning by Stella and Blanche. Blanche describes Stanley as 'Bearing the raw meat home' – a metaphor which recalls his throwing the meat at Stella in Scene 1.

Elia Kazan on Stella and Blanche

Here are director Elia Kazan's thoughts on the characters of Blanche and Stella.

- How does his interpretation of the two women (and their role) fit with your reading of the play so far? Is there anything here that makes you wonder how the play will develop?

BLANCHE

Find an entirely different character, a self-dramatized and self-romanticized character for Blanche to play in each scene, as if she were playing eleven different people … And all these eleven self-dramatized and romantic characters should derive from the romantic tradition of the Pre-Bellum South. For example, in Scene 2 she is 'Gay Miss-Devil May-Care'. [...] Blanche at the beginning should be a heavy. Stella has, through Stanley's assertive masculinity, found her own strength and health. Blanche immediately tries to infantalise Stella. In effect, this works to break up her happy home. But gradually the audience should begin to feel that Blanche is a complex, sensitive woman, out of her environment, really rather helpless and in real difficulty. As this happens, the pain and the reality begin to appear – a democracy of pain and need, basic human tragedy begins to show, and slowly the audience should start to pity and admire her.

STELLA

Stella is a refined girl who has found a kind of salvation or realization, but at a terrific price. She keeps her eyes closed, even stays in bed as much as possible so that she won't realize, won't feel the pain of the price she has paid […] She's waiting for the dark where Stanley makes her feel only him, and she has no reminder of what she has given up. She does not want the other world to intrude.

The overheard conversation – a dramatic device

In this scene Tennessee Williams makes use of a key dramatic device – the overheard conversation. It's a device that has been used in stage plays, films and television dramas to both comic and tragic effect. Unbeknownst to both Blanche and Stella, Stanley hears the whole of Blanche's monologue.

- Working in threes, perform the monologue, with one person playing the part of Blanche, one person playing the part of the silent Stella and one person playing Stanley. Both Stella and Stanley should show their reaction to what they hear in their facial expressions, body language and movement.

- After reading the monologue, consider what it means from the point of view of each of the three characters. Try answering this question, in role, speaking in the first person, to see what ideas it uncovers, then discuss these as a class:

When I heard Blanche

When I told Stella…

- As a class, discuss the function of the overheard monologue dramatically within this scene and the play as a whole.

SCENE 5

Before Reading

Exploring the structure so far

Although the play is structured as 11 scenes, without act divisions, the first production did have two intervals. These coincided with the time shifts in the play, the first taking place after Scene 4. With Scene 5, the action moves on from early May to August.

- Why might the end of Scene 4 have been a good place for an interval?

Reading Scene 5

Blanche's letter

Blanche has decided to write to an old admirer in the hope that he will invite her to visit him. As she writes, she reads parts out to Stella, commenting on what she is saying.

- Read the short section from *Blanche is seated in the bedroom* to 'cocktails, and luncheons'.

The letter is a fabrication – the description of her summer and of Stella's friends is nothing like the truth.

- What would Blanche write if she were to tell the truth as she understands it? Write the truthful version of her letter to Shep. (You could try using one or two distinctive features of Blanche's language use.)

- Is Blanche's letter just a lie? Or is there something more complicated going on? As a class, discuss what Tennessee Williams reveals about Blanche's character through this letter. How does it fit with what you have learned about her so far? Why does she create a fictional version of her life?

Blanche and Stanley's conversation

- Quickly re-read the conversation between Blanche and Stanley (from STANLEY [*contemptuously*]: Hah! to STANLEY: ... so he can check on it and clear up any mistake).

- Working in threes, perform the conversation, with two people playing the parts of Blanche and Stanley and one person voicing Blanche's secret thoughts – her unspoken response to what is said.

- If you can, record your conversation (for example, on a smartphone) so that you can play it back to other people in the class and compare the different commentaries.

- Debrief the activity by discussing what you each chose to focus on in your secret thoughts and why you think it was a valid interpretation of the text.

Blanche and the young man – the end of the scene

In the final section of this scene Blanche is left on her own as Stella and Stanley leave for a night out with Steve and Eunice.

- Read the rest of the scene and talk about why you think Williams chose to include this episode with the young man?
  - What do you think would have been lost had the scene ended at [*Dusk settles deeper. The music from the Four Deuces is slow and blue.]*?
  - Does it connect with, or make you reconsider anything you have already encountered in the play?
  - What questions does it provoke?

After Reading Scene 5

Steve and Eunice – what do they add?

Steve and Eunice are usually referred to as minor characters. Although their parts are small, they are significant, their presence woven through the first five scenes. So what do they add to the play? What is their dramatic function?

- Begin by looking through the first five scenes and listing all the occasions on which these characters appear and, very briefly, what they do. For example:

> Scene 1: Eunice lets Blanche into the flat.

In each case, consider what would be lost from the play if the character did not exist. For example, what difference would it make if Blanche had waited outside for Stella to return?

- Now think more broadly about the dramatic function of the two characters, using the statements below to fuel your debate.

> The characters Eunice and Steve…
>
> 1. … create a sense of a diverse world.
> 2. … act as a foil for Stella and Stanley.
> 3. … contribute to the play's exploration of love, sex and violence.
> 4. … contribute to the realist/naturalist element of the play.
> 5. … represent Stella and Stanley's world.
> 6. … foreground Blanche's isolation and difference.
> 7. … fulfil plot functions (for example, a retreat for Stella/Blanche).
> 8. … act as light relief – Eunice and Steve's rows have a comedic edge to them.

- As you read the rest of the play, continue to think about the role these two characters play. (If you are recording your ideas about the play in a journal or blog, use it to keep track of your observations about, and interpretations of, the characters.)

Blanche – a woman of many parts

Actors, directors, audiences and critics have all celebrated – and wrestled with – the contradictions in Blanche's character. Some of these contradictions are clear from the very beginning:

- needy yet domineering
- vulnerable yet flirty
- on the one hand confessional, on the other hand a performer
- keen to be looked after yet desperately trying to control the story of her life
- at some points she seems to believe in her own stories and at other times she is very honest about her manipulation of reality.

The whole scene (11 pages) takes place over only a few hours. During this time Blanche is shown behaving in very different ways.

- Skim through the scene and identify the different ways in which we see her behaving, for example:

> Hysterical and overwrought: 'I won't stay long! I won't, I promise, I – '

- What is the effect of Williams' dramatising Blanche in these ways? Look at the statements below and see if any of these chime with your interpretation.

1. Blanche acts the part she thinks she is supposed to play.
2. Only at moments of high tension or high emotion does Blanche's act drop – and we see a woman on the brink of losing control.
3. Blanche lives in a fantasy world.
4. Blanche's behaviour is shaped by a set of outmoded values – which in reality she is unable to live by.
5. There is a gulf between how Blanche says she behaves and how she actually behaves.

Blanche's monologues – naturalistic or expressionistic

This is the third scene in which Williams gives Blanche a long monologue. The monologues stand out (or are foregrounded) as being different from the much more naturalistic dialogue in the rest of the play.

Work in groups of three with each person taking responsibility for looking closely at one monologue. The monologues are reprinted on page 46.

- Read your monologue.
  - Think first about the ways in which it is naturalistic (like ordinary, everyday speech).
  - Focus next on the ways in which it is different from naturalistic dialogue. Try to identify what it is that makes it different (for example, the patterning, repetition, use of imagery).
- In your group of three, take it in turns to introduce your monologue. Then together draft a short paragraph exploring what makes the style of the monologues so distinctive.

Scene 1

I, I, *I* took the blows in my face and my body! All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father, mother! Margaret, that dreadful way! So big with it, it couldn't be put in a coffin! But had to be burned like rubbish! You just came home in time for the funerals, Stella. And funerals are pretty compared to deaths. Funerals are quiet, but deaths – not always. Sometimes their breathing is hoarse, and sometimes it rattles, and sometimes they even cry out to you, 'Don't let me go!' Even the old, sometimes, say, 'Don't let me go.' As if you were able to stop them! But funerals are quiet, with pretty flowers. And, oh, what gorgeous boxes they pack them away in! Unless you were there at the bed when they cried out, 'Hold me!' you'd never suspect there was the struggle for breath and bleeding. You didn't dream, but I saw! *Saw! Saw!* And now you sit there telling me with your eyes that I let the place go! How in hell do you think all that sickness and dying was paid for? Death is expensive, Miss Stella! And old Cousin Jessie's right after Margaret's, hers! Why, the Grim Reaper had put up his tent on our doorstep!... Stella. Belle Reve was his headquarters! Honey – that's how it slipped through my fingers! Which of them left us a fortune? Which of them left a cent of insurance even? Only poor Jessie – one hundred to pay for her coffin. That was all, Stella! And I with my pitiful salary at the school. Yes, accuse me! Sit there and stare at me, thinking I let the place go! *I* let the place go? Where were you. In bed with your – Polack!

Scene 4

He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There's even something – sub-human – something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! Yes, something – ape-like about him, like one of those pictures I've seen in – anthropological studies! Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is – Stanley Kowalski – survivor of the stone age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle! And you – you here – waiting for him! Maybe he'll strike you or maybe grunt and kiss you! That is, if kisses have been discovered yet! Night falls and the other apes gather! There in the front of the cave, all grunting like him, and swilling and gnawing and hulking! His poker night! – you call it – this party of apes! Somebody growls – some creature snatches at something – the fight is on! *God*! Maybe we are a long way from being made in God's image, but Stella – my sister – there has been some progress since then! Such things as art – as poetry and music – such kinds of new light have come into the world since then! In some kinds of people some tenderer feelings have had some little beginning! That we have got to make grow! And cling to, and hold as our flag! In this dark march toward whatever it is we're approaching… Don't – don't hang back with the brutes!

Scene 5

I never was hard or self-sufficient enough. When people are soft – soft people have got to court the favour of hard ones, Stella. Have got to be seductive – put on soft colours,the colours of butterfly wings, and glow – make a little – temporary magic just in order to pay for – one night's shelter! That's why I've been – not so awf'ly good lately. I've run for protection, Stella, from under one leaky roof to another leaky roof – because it was storm – all storm, and I was – caught in the centre ... People don't see you – *men* don't – don't even admit your existence unless they are making love to you. And you've got to have your existence admitted by someone, if you're going to have someone's protection. And so the soft people have to – shimmer and glow – put a paper lantern over the light ... But I'm scared now – awf'ly scared. I don't know how much longer I can turn the trick. It isn't enough to be soft. You've got to be soft *and attractive*. And I – I'm fading now!

SCENE 6

Before Reading the Scene

Only Mitch and Blanche appear in Scene 6. It's a short scene, set in the early hours of the morning, on their return from a night out. The stage direction sets the scene and the mood.

- Read the stage direction and talk about:
  - the mood conjured up in it
  - the descriptions of Mitch and Blanche
  - the way in which Williams suggests where they have been.
- In pairs, share your thoughts about how the scene will develop, then individually have a go at writing the first 10-15 lines. Draw on what you have learned so far about Williams' dramatic style (the way in which the characters speak, characteristic symbols and images), underlying themes and ideas and his dramatisation of Blanche and Mitch.
- Listen to a few of the dialogues and, as a class, talk about what different people have foregrounded in their scripts, both in terms of the content and the way in which it is written.

Reading the Scene

- In pairs read aloud the conversation between Mitch and Blanche, pausing at each of the following points to talk about the way Williams dramatises their relationship.
  - BLANCHE: … Just enough for two shots without any dividends, honey …
  - […] *There is a considerable silence between them. BLANCHE sighs and MITCH coughs self-consciously.*]
  - […] *She makes a gesture of revulsion. Then she finishes her drink. A pause follows.*]
  - [*Mitch clears his throat and nods.*] I understand what this is.

In your work on Scene 1 you may have tried exploring a conversation between Blanche and Stella using just a few of the tools linguists use to analyse spontaneous conversation.

- As a class, look through the list on page 48. Do any of the points strike you as being particularly interesting in relation to Blanche and Mitch's conversation? Which do you think might help you prise open the dialogue to see how it works dramatically? You could, for example, decide it would be interesting to look just at the different types of utterance – questioning, commanding, exclaiming or stating. Or to see who sets the agenda. Or whether adjacency pairs are followed or not.
- Share out the conversation between you, with different pairs taking responsibility for the sections identified above.
- Re-read your section, looking at it in relation to one of the aspects of conversation analysis. What new insights do you get?
- Take it in turns to feed back the most interesting thing you have discovered.

Five key aspects of conversation analysis

- Who decides what the conversation will be about (**agenda-setting**) and who changes the topic?
- Does each person wait till the other has finished or does one person keep interrupting (**turn-taking**)?
- What type of speech acts does each character use? For example:
  - Statements
  - Questions
  - Exclamations
  - Commands

  Who demands, threatens and complains? Who answers, agrees, gives in or apologises?
- Are the expected patterns followed or broken (**adjacency pairs**)? For example:
  - Question/answer
  - Congratulations/thanks
  - Apology/acceptance
  - Leave-taking/leave-taking
- What names do people call each other by (**modes of address**)?

From raw honesty to outright lies

One of the interesting things about this scene is the way Blanche shifts from being very open and truthful ('I don't think I have ever tried so hard to be gay') to outright lies ('I guess I just have old-fashioned ideals. [*She rolls her eyes knowing he cannot see her face.*])

Some of the ways you might describe her behaviour in the scene include:

- Shared fantasy
- Lying
- Delusion
- Truth-telling
- Story-telling
- Constructing a version of the truth
- Adopting a persona
- Role-playing

- Use these terms to help you identify Blanche's shifting behaviour in this scene. What is Williams saying here? How does Blanche's behaviour connect to the underlying themes being explored in the text?

'He was a boy' – Blanche's marriage

At the end of Scene 1 Stanley asked Blanche about her marriage:

> STANLEY: … You were married once, weren't you? [*The music of the polka rises up, faint in the distance.*]
>
> BLANCHE: Yes. When I was quite young.
>
> STANLEY: What happened?
>
> BLANCHE: The boy – the boy died. [*She sinks back down.*] I'm afraid I'm – going to be sick! [*Her head falls on her arms.*]

- As a class, discuss your expectations of the story she will tell about her marriage.
- Read Blanche's monologue and share your first response to it. Use the prompts below if they are helpful.
  - Do you believe her? Are you moved?
  - Do you wonder why she has told the story now?
  - What do you make of Mitch's reaction?
  - Are there echoes of anything you've already encountered (in terms of plot, themes and images)?
- Why do you think Williams includes the story of Blanche's marriage here? What function does it serve? Use the statements below to start your discussion.

1. It provides a reason for Blanche's distress.
2. It presents Blanche in a more sympathetic light.
3. It allows Williams to explore difficult issues around homosexuality (still illegal at the time) in a way which would be accepted by the censors.
4. It is at the heart of the play – literally (in Scene 6 of 11), as well as in terms of plot and themes (for example, desire, masculinity, delusion, appearance and reality).
5. It is part of the structural 'glue' – the repetition of the story sets up echoes across the play.

The symbolism of light

Throughout the play Blanche avoids strong light, even buying 'an adorable little coloured paper lantern' to cover the 'naked light bulb' – as offensive to her as 'a rude remark or a vulgar action'.

- Read the two quotations below and talk about what is being said here about the significance of light for Blanche. What does the light symbolise for her?

> It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been in half shadow, that's how it struck the world for me.

> And then 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 …

- Look back through the play to find three or four further quotations where Williams seems to be using light (or its absence) symbolically. Annotate the quotations with your ideas about what the light represents and its association with particular characters and themes.
- As a class, pool your discoveries. You could record these as a mind map so that you can make connections between your quotations and interpretations. Add to your ideas as you continue to read the play.

SCENE 7

Before Reading Scene 7

Stanley's revelation

- Before reading Scene 7, look again at the following extract from Scene 5. What do you think is going on?

STANLEY:	Say, do you happen to know somebody named Shaw?
	[*Her face expresses a faint shock. She reaches for the cologne bottle and dampens her handkerchief as she answers carefully.]*
BLANCHE:	Why everybody knows somebody named Shaw!
STANLEY:	Well, this somebody named Shaw is under the impression he met you in Laurel, but I figure he must have got you mixed up with some other party because this other party is someone he met at a hotel called the Flamingo.
	[*Blanche laughs breathlessly as she touches the cologne-dampened handkerchief to her temples.*]
BLANCHE:	I'm afraid he does have me mixed up with this 'other party'. The Hotel Flamingo is not the sort of establishment I would dare to be seen in!
STANLEY:	You know of it?
BLANCHE:	Yes, I've seen it and smelled it.
STANLEY:	You must've got pretty close if you could smell it.
BLANCHE:	The odour of cheap perfume is penetrating.
STANLEY:	The stuff you use is expensive?
BLANCHE:	Twenty-five dollars an ounce! I'm nearly out. That's just a hint if you want to remember for my birthday!
	[*She speaks lightly but her voice has a note of fear.*]
STANLEY:	Shaw must've got you mixed up. He goes in and out of Laurel all the time, so he can check on it and clear up any mistake.
	[*He turns away and crosses to the portières. Blanche closes her eyes as if faint. Her hand trembles as she lifts the handkerchief to her forehead.*] …
	[*He goes out. Blanche rises from her chair. She seems faint; looks about her with an expression of almost panic.*]
BLANCHE:	Stella! What have you heard about me?
STELLA:	Huh?
BLANCHE:	What have people been telling you about me?
STELLA:	Telling?
BLANCHE:	You haven't heard any – unkind – gossip about me?
STELLA:	Why, no, Blanche, of course not!
BLANCHE:	Honey, there was – a good deal of talk in Laurel.
STELLA:	About *you*, Blanche?
BLANCHE:	I wasn't so good the last two years or so, after Belle Reve had started to slip through my fingers.

Reading Scene 7

- Now read Scene 7. Share your response to Stanley's revelation and Stella's reaction to what he tells her.

After Reading Scene 7

Music in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

A Streetcar Named Desire is infused with music and other sound effects: the 'blue piano', Blanche's singing, the sound of the streetcar, running water and so on. Its most obvious function is to create a believable world. But music and other sound effects are also used symbolically. The 'blue piano' is a good example of this.

- Look back through the play and find two or three instances where the 'blue piano' seems to be fulfilling a particular function. Use the suggestions below to help you.
  - It conjures up the atmosphere of the French Quarter of New Orleans.
  - It 'expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here', in Williams' own view.
  - It 'catches the soul of Blanche [...], it emotionally reminds you, what all the fireworks are caused by', according to director Elia Kazan.
  - It seems to be used at moments of high drama or heightened emotion.

In deciding how to stage Scene 7, Williams makes interesting use of music. As Stanley and Stella talk about Blanche, their conversation is punctuated by the sound of Blanche, in the bath, singing Paper Moon. The stage direction describes this as:

[*BLANCHE is singing in the bathroom a saccharine popular ballad which is used contrapuntally with STANLEY's speech.*]

Contrapuntal is a musical term used to describe a composition where one melody works against another.

- Working in fours, re-read Scene 7 from this stage direction, with one person reading the stage directions. Then talk about:
  - the significance of Stanley and Stella's conversation
  - the lyrics of Blanche's song
  - in what sense the singing could be said to work 'contrapuntally'
  - the impact on the audience of Williams' decision to stage the scene in this way.

Musical motifs and sound effects throughout the play

- As a class, brainstorm all the other examples of musical motifs and sound effects used in the play so far (for example, the music on the wireless, the sound of the streetcar). Share these out between the class.
- Trace your musical motif/sound effect across the first seven scenes, looking out for:
  - the ways it is described by Williams
  - patterns in its use
  - the dramatic function it fulfils.
- Choose a short quotation as an example of one or two of these places.
- As a class, discuss the ways in which Williams uses music and sound effects in naturalistic and expressionistic ways in the play. (See pages 11-12 for a reminder of naturalism and expressionism.)

SCENE 8

Scenes 7 to 10 all take place on the same evening – Scene 8 only three-quarters of an hour after the end of Scene 7. It is a short scene, featuring only Stella, Stanley and Blanche and a phone call.

Reading Scene 8

- Read the scene on your own, to familiarise yourself with it and briefly note down:
  - your first response, including questions
  - ideas about the themes developed in it
  - ideas about the function of the scene and how it fits into the development of the drama.
- In groups of three, read the scene again, this time also thinking about where each of the characters sits or stands in relation to the others. Talk about the contribution the staging makes (even the simple positioning of the characters on stage might be used to effect the audience's interpretation).

What's most significant?

Although Scene 8 is short, a lot happens.

- Which of the following would you say is most significant? Defend your choice.

1. The empty 4th chair, set for Mitch.
2. Blanche's social niceties (the story, the comment about the candles, her reaction to the birthday present).
3. Stanley's first outburst: 'Pig – Polack – disgusting – vulgar – greasy!'
4. Stanley's second outburst: 'I am one hundred percent American.'
5. Blanche asking Stella what Stanley told her while she was in the bath.
6. Blanche's call to Mitch.
7. Stanley's call to arrange his game of bowls.
8. Stanley telling Stella things will be alright once Blanche has left.
9. Stanley's birthday present to Blanche.
10. Stella's attempts to smooth over the tensions.
11. The music of the Varsouviana polka.
12. Stella telling Stanley to take her to the hospital.

After Reading Scene 8

Thinking about the function of Scene 8

What would you say is the function of this scene? Included below are some words you might use in a discussion about this scene.

- With a partner, choose those you think are most pertinent to this scene.
- Share your choices in class discussion, exploring your reasons.

Aspects of drama	Themes
Transition	Loyalty
Confrontation	Betrayal
Evasion	Exposure
Interruption	Femininity
Tension	Loneliness
Conflict	Reality and illusion
Revelation	Family
Opposition/counterpoint	Storytelling
	Masculinity
	Class
	Desire
	Disgust
	Power
	Scorn
	Respect

Speculating about the final scenes

There are three scenes left. Scenes 9 and 10 take place on the same evening. Scene 11 is set 'some weeks later'. What will the final scenes bring?

- As a class, clarify the different elements of the story to be concluded, then share your thoughts about how Williams will dramatise these.

SCENE 9

Key Quotations Before Reading

Included here are 10 quotations from Scene 9. They are all spoken by Blanche.

- In pairs, read the quotations. Talk about the images used and the themes suggested. How do these quotations connect with what you have read so far?
- Based on these quotations (and what you have read so far), what do you think this scene will be about?

1. I like it dark. The dark is comforting to me.
2. I don't want realism.
3. I'll tell you what I want. Magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth. I tell what ought to be the truth.
4. Rub-a-dub-dub, three men in a tub! And such a filthy tub!
5. Yes, a big spider! That's where I brought my victims.
6. After the death of Allan, intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with.
7. you seemed to be gentle – a cleft in the rock of the world that I could hide in!
8. Crumble and fade and – regrets – recriminations … 'If you'd done this, it would've cost me that!'
9. and death was as close as you are …
10. The opposite is desire. So do you wonder?

- Now read the scene, looking out for these phrases in context.

This scene brings together two of the themes which have been central to the play from the moment Blanche arrived on the streetcar named 'Desire' on its way to 'Cemeteries': death and desire.

- As a class, discuss your response to the way in which Williams brings the two themes together in this scene. Skim back through the play to find two or three quotations which anticipate the juxtaposition of these two themes.

Blanche and Mitch

This is Blanche and Mitch's third conversation.

Here's how one reader described the trajectory of their relationship.

> The Blanche/Mitch story is often thought of as a sub-plot – a foil to the Blanche/Stanley story. But I'd argue their relationship crystallises the very essence of this tragedy – it's where we see Blanche at her most honest and exposed. In skeleton form it reveals the structure of the play: Blanche moves from coquettish southern belle to betrayed women, exposed to the harsh light of reality.

- In pairs, discuss how convincing you find this reading of the relationship.

Blanche and the Varsouviana polka

- Listen to the Varsouviana polka and share your response to it. (Search YouTube where there are plenty of recordings.) How would you describe this music? What sort of emotional mood does it suggest?

The Varsouviana polka is first heard in Scene 1 when Stanley questions Blanche about her marriage. It is then heard whenever the marriage is mentioned and when Blanche seems distressed or detached from reality.

- Look again at the way Williams uses the Varsouviana polka in Blanche's monologue at the end of Scene 6. Read the monologue in pairs, with one person playing the part of Blanche and the other reading out the stage directions.

- Share anything that strikes you. For example, what do you make of the fact that, as Blanche describes the music of the polka, the stage directions indicate that polka music plays?

- Why does Blanche have this music in her head? What does it suggest about her state of mind?

An expressionistic dramatic technique

In Scene 9 we discover that this music is heard only by Blanche:

- *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.*
- BLANCHE: … 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...

The fact that no other character on stage hears the music raises some interesting questions about the play – and especially the experience of seeing it on stage.

- As a class, discuss your first thoughts about these questions, including anything you think might prove tricky in production.
  - Why does Williams only make it clear in Scene 9 that the polka music is in Blanche's mind?
  - What about seeing the play in production? How should a director show that only Blanche hears the music? Should he or she stage the play in such a way that this is clear from the very beginning (before Williams makes it clear in the stage directions)?
  - How does it compare with Williams' use of other sound effects in the play? Would you describe this use as naturalistic or expressionistic or a combination of the two?

Accelerating towards the end of the play

Elia Kazan, the director of the first production identified Scene 9 as the crisis of the play, summing up the scene as:

> Blanche's last desperate effort to save herself by telling the whole truth. The truth dooms her.

- What do you think about his brief interpretation of this scene?

- Given this interpretation, share your predictions about how Williams will bring the play to a conclusion in the final two scenes.

SCENE 10

After Reading Scene 10

A first response

- Write about your response to the scene – what happens, the way in which the story of the scene is dramatised (in particular Williams' use of sound, music and lighting to create mood and tell the story at key points).

From Scene 1 Williams repeatedly sets up confrontations between Stanley and Blanche.

In Scene 10 Stanley says 'We've had this date with each other from the beginning'.

- What does he mean by 'date'? In what ways has this 'date' been prepared for from the beginning of the play? Could things have ended differently for Blanche and Stanley?

A critical response

Included below are two very different responses to the scene – you'd put them at opposite ends of a continuum.

- As a class, discuss your views of the opposing interpretations, using them as foils against which to test your own response to the scene.

    1. Melodramatic and gratuitous – an easy way to increase the emotional temperature and shock an audience.
    2. Dramatically skilful and appropriate – an outcome which despite coming as a shock almost immediately feels inevitable, prepared for from Scene 1.

15, 5, 1 – the essential version

- Working on your own, experiment with paring this dramatic and shocking scene to its essential elements. Begin by selecting 15 lines from across the scene to represent the whole, then five lines, then one line.

- Compare your choices with two or three other people and discuss what these reveal about your interpretation of the scene.

The rape scene – dramatising controversy

Although *A Streetcar Named Desire* was already a critical and popular success on the Broadway stage, winning three prestigious awards for theatre, Williams and director Elia Kazan had some difficulty getting the film version past the American censors.

Williams and Kazan had already made what they considered to be significant changes to address the censors' concerns. There was one issue on which Williams was not prepared to change: the rape of Blanche.

His letter to the censors is reproduced on page 57.

- Read the letter and talk about the issues he raises – including his own interpretation of the play's meaning.

- Re-read the scene and, if you can, watch this scene in Elia Kazan's 1951 adaptation of the play.

- What is your view of Scene 10?

You can explore the issues surrounding the production of the film in the section on 'Exploring Context' in After Reading.

October 29, 1950

Dear Mr. Breen:

Mr. Kazan has just informed me that objections have been raised about the 'rape scene' in 'Streetcar' and I think perhaps it might be helpful for me to clarify the meaning and importance of this scene. As everyone must have acknowledged by now since it has been pointed out in the press by members of the clergy of all denominations, and not merely in the press but in the pulpit – 'Streetcar' is an extremely and peculiarly moral play, in the deepest and truest sense of the term. This fact is so well known that a misunderstanding of it now at this late date would arouse widespread attention and indignation.

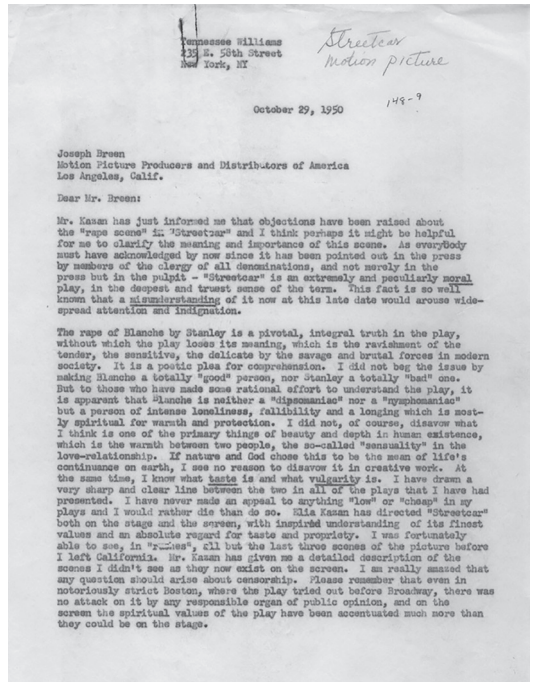
The rape of Blanche by Stanley is a pivotal, integral truth in the play, without which the play loses its meaning, which is the ravishment of the tender, the sensitive, the delicate by the savage and brutal forces in modern society. It is a poetic plea for comprehension. I did not beg the issue by making Blanche a totally 'good' person, nor Stanley a totally 'bad' one. But to those who have made some rational effort to understand the play, it is apparent that Blanche is neither a 'dipsomaniac' nor a 'nymphomaniac' but a person of intense loneliness, fallibility and a longing which is mostly spiritual for warmth and protection. I did not, of course, disavow what I think is one of the primary things of beauty and depth in human experience, which is the warmth between two people, the so-called 'sensuality' in the love-relationship. If nature and God chose this to be the mean of life's continuance on earth, I see no reason to disavow it in creative work. At the same time, I know what taste is and what vulgarity is. I have drawn a very sharp and clear line between the two in all of the plays that I have had presented. I have never made an appeal to anything 'low' or 'cheap' in my plays and I would rather die than do so. Elia Kazan has directed 'Streetcar' both on the stage and the screen, with inspired understanding of its finest values and an absolute regard for taste and propriety. I was fortunately able to see, in 'rushes', all but the last three scenes of the picture before I left California. Mr. Kazan has given me a detailed description of the scenes I didn't see as they now exist on the screen. I am really amazed that any question should arise about censorship. Please remember that even in notoriously strict Boston, where the play tried out before Broadway, there was no attack on it by any responsible organ of public opinion, and on the screen the spiritual values of the play have been accentuated much more than they could be on the stage.

The poetically beautiful and touching performance of a great visiting artist, Vivien Leigh, has dominated the picture and given it a stature which surpasses that of the play. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is one of the truly great American films and one of the very few really moral films that have come out of Hollywood. To mutilate it, now, by forcing, or attempting to force, disastrous alterations in the essential truth of it would serve no good end that I can imagine.

Please remember, also, that we have already made great concessions which we felt were dangerous to attitudes which we thought were narrow. In the middle of preparations for a new play, on which I have been working for two years, I came out to Hollywood to re-write certain sequences to suit the demands of your office. No one involved in this screen production has failed in any respect to show you the cooperation, and even deference, that has been called for. But now we are fighting for what we think is the heart of the play, and when we have our backs against the wall – if we are forced into that position – none of us is going to throw in the towel! We will use every legitimate means that any of us has at his or her disposal to protect the things in this film which we think cannot be sacrificed, since we feel that it contains some very important truths about the world we live in.

Sincerely,

Tennessee Williams



Tennessee Williams
[illegible] E. 58th Street
New York, NY

Streetcar
motion picture

October 29, 1950

Joseph Breen
Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America
Los Angeles, Calif.

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The rape of Blanche by Stanley is a pivotal, integral truth in the play, without which the play loses its meaning, which is the ravishment of the tender, the sensitive, the delicate by the savage and brutal forces in modern society. It is a poetic plea for comprehension. I did not beg the issue by making Blanche a totally "good" person, nor Stanley a totally "bad" one. But to those who have made some rational effort to understand the play, it is apparent that Blanche is neither a "dipsomaniac" nor a "nymphomaniac" but a person of intense loneliness, fallibility and a longing which is mostly spiritual for warmth and protection. I did not, of course, disavow what I think is one of the primary things of beauty and depth in human existence, which is the warmth between two people, the so-called "sensuality" in the love-relationship. If nature and God chose this to be the mean of life's continuance on earth, I see no reason to disavow it in creative work. At the same time, I know what taste is and what vulgarity is. I have drawn a very sharp and clear line between the two in all of the plays that I have had presented. I have never made an appeal to anything "low" or "cheap" in my plays and I would rather die than do so. Elia Kazan has directed "Streetcar" both on the stage and the screen, with inspired understanding of its finest values and an absolute regard for taste and propriety. I was fortunately able to see, in "rushes", all but the last three scenes of the picture before I left California. Mr. Kazan has given me a detailed description of the scenes I didn't see as they now exist on the screen. I am really amazed that any question should arise about censorship. Please remember that even in notoriously strict Boston, where the play tried out before Broadway, there was no attack on it by any responsible organ of public opinion, and on the screen the spiritual values of the play have been accentuated much more than they could be on the stage.

SCENE 11

Before Reading

Predictions

Scene 10 ends with Stanley's rape of Blanche. There is only one scene left.

- As a class, share your thoughts about how the play will end and why. Try to think not just of how the story might be brought to an end but what would make a dramatically fitting conclusion.

After Reading

A fitting conclusion

- Read through the final scene, ideally out loud and on your feet, so that you can work out where each character is in relation to Blanche.
- On your own, spend 10 minutes writing in any way you want about your response to the scene, as the conclusion of the play. If it helps you could use the following prompts to help you clarify your own views.
  - Predictable – the only way it could end?
  - Shocking – but inevitable?
  - Dramatically unsatisfying and inappropriate?
  - Sensational and gratuitous?
  - Satisfying for the audience on an emotional, personal response level?
  - Appropriate and satisfying as a piece of drama?
- In what ways does this scene draw on what has happened in other scenes? In pairs, take responsibility for thinking about this question in relation to just one aspect of the drama:
  - plot-lines
  - characterisation and relationships
  - staging and use of non-naturalistic techniques and dramatic devices
  - language: symbols and motifs
  - themes.

Key quotes

Here are 10 quotations from the final scene.

- Pick the one you think is most significant and explain why. Is there a different short quotation you would have chosen? If so, write it out, giving the reason for your choice.

1. Luck is believing you're lucky.
2. You... you... you... Brag... brag... bull.
3. I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley.
4. Please don't get up. I'm only passing through.
5. *Lurid reflections appear on the wall in odd, sinuous shapes. The 'Varsouviana' is filtered into weird distortion, accompanied by the cries and noises of the jungle.*
6. I don't know you – I don't know you – I don't know you. I want to be – left alone – please!
7. What have I done to my sister? Oh, God, what have I done to my sister?
8. Whoever you are – I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.
9. *The luxurious sobbing, the sensual murmur fade away under the swelling music of the 'blue piano' and the muted trumpet.*

An altered ending

In the film a subtle but significant change was made to the play's conclusion in order to satisfy the censors.

- The play ends with Stanley comforting Stella.
- In the film, Stella leaves Stanley, taking the baby with her.

- What do you think of this change? What difference does it make to the meaning an audience takes from the play? What about the impact of the play as a piece of drama?

Tragedy? Problem play? Comedy?

The actor Roxana Stuart, who played Blanche in two productions, described *A Streetcar Named Desire* like this:

> The first four scenes are comedy; then come two scenes of elegy, mood, romance; then five scenes of tragedy.

- What do you think of this as an analysis?

AFTER READING

A Play About…?

- Explore your first response to the whole play, by writing about it for 10 minutes in any way you want. This piece of writing is just for you.
- Now spend no more than five minutes writing a one-sentence snapshot of the play. You will be sharing this piece of writing with other people in your class.
- Compare your snapshot overviews and discuss the similarities and differences in what people have chosen to foreground.

Included here are eight snapshots, extracted from criticism and reviews of the play.

- How do they compare to your snapshots? Any new ideas you find interesting? Anything you'd want to challenge?

1. A great American play about the lies we all need to sustain our precarious existence (Michael Billington, 2002)
2. A somber, Darwinian tragedy. All survival demands its price [...] This is a deeply felt, achingly cruel play, but it is utterly unsentimental. (John Peter, 1996)
3. A pitiless analysis of character that gathers momentum all evening and concludes with both logic and dramatic impact. (Brooks Atkinson, 1947)
4. This is a poetic tragedy, not a realistic, naturalistic one. (Elia Kazan, 1947)
5. Everything about *Streetcar* is beautifully, uniquely theatrical – right down to the title. (William Hauptman, 1990)
6. *Streetcar* is a play of sexual politics. Its language, both blunt and luminous, courted taboo subjects – nymphomania, homosexuality, polysemous desire. (Philip C. Kolin, 2008)
7. All his [Williams'] major themes: the ambiguous nature of sexuality, the betrayal of faith, the corruption of modern America, the over-arching battle of artistic sensitivity against physical materialism. (Christopher Innes, 1995)
8. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is not only the story of a desperate woman at the end of her tether but of a culture in a state of crisis, its certainties dislocating, its myths collapsing. (Christopher Bigsby, 1984)

Titling the Scenes

- Create a personal summary of the play by coming up with the following for each of the 11 scenes:
  - a title (will you keep Williams' title The Poker Night for Scene 3 or come up with something else?)
  - a key quote from the scene
  - a newspaper sandwich board headline.
- Compare your choices. What can you tell about the different ways in which people have interpreted the play, through what they have drawn attention to?

Williams' Letter to Elia Kazan – The Playwright's Interpretation

Tennessee Williams was determined that it should be Elia Kazan who direct *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Although initially reluctant to take on the task, Kazan not only directed the first production of the stage play but also the 1951 film adaptation, becoming almost as closely associated with the play as Williams himself.

Included here is the letter Williams wrote to Kazan to convince him to direct the play.

- Read the letter, highlighting short phrases (three to four words) which give you a new insight into the play or which strike you as being interesting to pursue further.
- Share your response in class discussion, comparing Williams' view of his play with your own.

I will try to clarify my intentions in this play. I think its best quality is its authenticity or its fidelity to life. There are no 'good' or 'bad' people. Some are a little better or a little worse but all are activated more by misunderstanding than malice. A blindness to what is going on in each other's hearts. Stanley sees Blanche not as a desperate, driven creature backed into a last corner to make a last desperate stand – but as a calculating bitch with 'round heels'. Mitch accepts first her own false projection of herself as a refined young virgin, saving herself for the one eventual mate – then jumps way over to Stanley's conception of her. Nobody sees anybody truly, but all through the flaws of their own egos. That is the way we all see each other in life. Vanity, fear, desire, competition – all such distortions within our own egos – condition our visions of those in relation to us. Add to those distortions in our own egos, the corresponding distortions in the egos of others – and you see how cloudy the glass must become through which we look at each other … I remember you asked me what should an audience feel for Blanche. Certainly pity. It is a tragedy with the classic aim of producing a catharsis of pity and terror, and in order to do that Blanche must finally have the understanding and compassion of the audience. This without creating a black-dyed villain in Stanley. It is a thing (misunderstanding) not a person (Stanley) that destroys her in the end. In the end you should feel – 'If only they all had known about each other!' – But there was always the paper lantern or the naked bulb!

Letter from Tennessee Williams to Elia Kazan (19th April 1947)

Debating Statements

- Working in pairs, discuss your response to the following one-sentence statements about the play.
- Select the three statements you find most helpful to feedback in class discussion. What do your choices reveal about your overall response to the play?

1. An overwrought melodrama not a tragedy.
2. A play about class.
3. A play dramatising clashing beliefs and ideologies.
4. A criticism of the old South, showing it to be based on a lie and a celebration of new cosmopolitan way of life.
5. The tragedy of a flawed and fragile individual.
6. A grittily realistic play exploiting theatrical and dramatic devices in order to express this fully.
7. A domestic tragedy dramatising conflict within families.
8. A play that explores the power of the imagination for good and bad, in both its themes and the form of the play.
9. A play that pits masculinity and femininity against each other.
10. A play with sexuality and sexual desire at its heart.

Epigraphs and Titles

The epigraph

The play text of *A Streetcar Named Desire* includes the following epigraph:

> 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 Broken Tower' by Hart Crane*

According to critical biographies of Tennessee Williams, the epigraph was chosen very carefully, with the playwright rejecting several before choosing Hart Crane's poem.

- Think about why he might have chosen it. What insights or different angles does it give you into the play?

Alternative titles

Tennessee Williams considered a number of different titles before settling on *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

- Consider the pros and cons of each, including the final choice, teasing out what each foregrounds about the play.
  - The Poker Night
  - The Moth
  - Blanche's Chair in the Moon
  - Go, Said the Bird
  - The Primary Colors
  - Electric Avenue
  - The Passion of a Moth
  - A Streetcar Named Desire
- Now you know the play by its final title, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, it's difficult to think of it as anything else. But are there alternatives of your own that you might have argued for?

The final title

- Felicia Hardison Londré, a Tennessee Williams scholar, claims 'The first indication of the play's brilliance lies in its title, *A Streetcar Named Desire*'. Key words from her discussion include:
  - Theatrical metaphor
  - Concrete mundaneness
  - Abstract quality of aspiration
  - Thematic, symbolic and imagistic oppositions
  - Specific locale
  - Movement
  - Emotional journey
- Discuss the key words and what you understand by them.

Character in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Different characters' stories

During your reading of the play you may already have thought about scenes from the perspective of the different characters. Here you are going to think more widely about the whole play, asking 'What is your story?' of each of the four main characters: Blanche, Stella, Stanley and Mitch.

- Divide the class into four and allocate one of the main characters to each section of the class. (Depending on the size of the class, decide whether you need to have more than one group working on each character.)
- In your group, work on telling the story of *A Streetcar Named Desire* from the perspective of your character.
- As a class, listen to the different characters' stories, sharing your responses to the ways in which the groups have represented their story – and challenging them if necessary.
- Then, either as a class or in sharing groups (with each of the characters represented), consider how these stories fit together, using the questions below as prompts.
  - Where do the stories cross?
  - Where do the stories run smoothly together?
  - Where do they clash, bringing characters and their desires into conflict?
  - How are these interactions created and shown in the play?

Kazan's spines

As part of his preparation for directing the play, Elia Kazan identified what he saw as the main motivation driving each character through the play. He called this the character's 'spine'.

- From the story you have shaped for each character, see if you can agree what their spine is before comparing your ideas with Kazan's, below.

> An effort to phrase Blanche's spine: to find protection, to find something to hold on to, some strength in whose protection she can live, like a sucker shark or a parasite. The tradition of woman (or all women) can only live though the strength of someone else. Blanche is entirely dependent.
>
> Stella's spine: to hold on to Stanley. Blanche is the antagonist.
>
> One of the important things about Stanley is that Blanche would wreck his home. Blanche is dangerous. She is destructive […] Soon she would have him and Stella fighting. He's got the things the way he wants them around there, and he does not want them upset by a phony, corrupt, sick, destructive woman [...] He builds a hedonist life and fights to the death to defend it [...]
>
> Mitch's *spine*: to get away from his mother. Blanche is the lever. He wants the perfection his mother gave him – everything is approving, protective, perfect for him. Naturally no girl today, no sensible, decent girl, will give him this. But the tradition will.

What function do the characters fulfil?

Characters in any drama text fulfil different functions. At its simplest, this might be as the 'baddie' or love interest or as a character included to make the plot work (a messenger, for example). But there are other functions too, as listed here.

1. To play a major or a minor role – the central focus of the drama or a less significant role. (In either case, this might involve fulfilling some of the roles below.)
2. To act as a foil or contrast to another character, to bring out their qualities.
3. To be representative of a 'type' (e.g. brothers, daughters, wives, lovers).
4. To further the plot – playing a key part in the events.
5. To create a different kind of dramatic experience (e.g. to create moments of light relief, or provide tragic intensity).
6. To develop one or more of the key themes of the play (e.g. loyalty, jealousy, power).
7. To carry a mood or tone or be associated with a kind of language (e.g. the poetic, the magical, the crude, the comical).
8. Something else particular to an individual play or character.

- In pairs or groups, use these ideas and the table of events, themes and symbols to help you think about the functions fulfilled by the different characters in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Blanche DuBois	Steve Hubbel	A Young Collector
Stella Kowalski	Pablo Gonzales	A Mexican Woman
Stanley Kowalski	Negro Woman	Allan Grey
Harold Mitchell [Mitch]	A Strange Man [Doctor]	Shep
Eunice Hubbel	A Strange Woman [Nurse]	School Principal

Events	Themes	Symbol/motifs
The poker game	Love	Blue piano
The rape	Sex	Light
Stella's baby	Death	Bathing
The birthday meal	Masculinity and femininity	Desire
Mitch and Blanche's night out	Money	Moths
Blanche and Stella's night out	Ethnicity	Sickness
The bowling game	Desire	Animals
Blanche's arrival	Loneliness	Games
Stella, Stanley, Steve and Eunice's night out	Time (past/present/future)	Sight/blindness
Steve and Eunice's row	Youth and age	Colour
Stella and Stanley's row	Reality and illusion	Streetcar
Stella and Stanley make up	Fantasy	Telephone
The arrival of the postboy	Class	Clothing
The arrival of the doctor and nurse	Destiny/fate	The polka
	Identity	
	The South	
	Home	
	Family	

Shifting Power, Shifting Sympathies

Who holds the power?

It's tempting to make some very sweeping statements about the relationships between different characters – Blanche dominates Stella, Stella is in thrall to Stanley, Stanley crushes Blanche. But are these statements true? Or is the drama more subtle than this?

- Working in pairs, take one of the key relationships and explore the way it is dramatised by working through the following stages.
  - Select three to five key interactions between the characters.
  - Identify:
    - the key focus of the interaction
    - where the drama or conflict is in the interaction.
  - Decide who holds the power and why, drawing on the different approaches you've practised (e.g. conversation analysis, noting patterning).
  - Use the interactions you've chosen as a way of tracing the power shifts across the play.

Shifting sympathies

One powerful impact *A Streetcar Named Desire* has in the theatre is in relation to its ambiguity. The audience is uncertain where their sympathies should lie and their allegiances are sometimes challenged. Williams himself insisted that while Blanche should gain the sympathy of the audience, this should not be achieved by portraying Stanley as an out-and-out villain:

> Blanche must finally have the understanding and compassion of the audience. This without creating a black-dyed villain in Stanley. It is a thing (Misunderstanding) not a person (Stanley) that destroys her in the end. In the end you should feel – 'If only they had known about each other.'[...] Blanche is not an angel without a flaw and Stanley's not evil.

Through the 11 scenes we see the flaws and contradictions in each character, intensified through the pressure cooker situation in which they are placed.

- Blanche, isolated and vulnerable, is also a selfish and manipulative snob.
- Stanley, a cruel bully, overhears his sister-in-law dismiss him as an ape.
- Stella, tolerant and welcoming of her sister, ends by betraying her in favour of a life with Stanley.

- Working in pairs or threes, take responsibility for exploring the shifting power and sympathy in one of the scenes.
  - Begin by reading your scene aloud (or key extracts from it). As you read, indicate which character holds the power by standing up/sitting down or passing between you an object symbolising power. Make a note of your findings.
  - Look again at the scene and discuss where you think the audience's sympathies lie at each stage and how this is gained.

- Take it in turns to present your discoveries and, as a class, discuss the shifting power and sympathy across the play.

A Streetcar Named Desire – An American Tragedy

Tragedy is a tricky term – in everyday life we use it to mean something sad or horrifying. In literary terms it has a more specific meaning – and even here it's not straightforward! *A Streetcar Named Desire* is very often classed as a tragedy. But what does that mean for a play written in the mid-20th century? Can ideas from classical Greek or Renaissance England or France help us understand the meaning and power of this play?

Included here are some key ideas about tragedy as a literary genre.

- Read the key ideas below and the three quotations at the top of page 67, highlighting or underlining anything which strikes you as potentially relevant to *A Streetcar Named Desire*.
- Share your own ideas, then use the statements on page 67 to sharpen, challenge or open up your own thinking.

Key ideas

- The drama is usually centred upon a character (the protagonist) who acts in a way which proves disastrous.
- The scope of the play's action is limited in terms of plot (which should not be too complex). The time the action takes to elapse should also be limited, as should the location of the action.
- There is a calamitous outcome (the catastrophe) which causes an emotional response in its audience.
- Fear (or awe): one of the emotions the audience experiences through tragic drama.
- Hamartia: the protagonist's error of judgement which brings about their downfall.
- Hubris: excessive human pride, self-belief or self-importance.
- Tragic protagonist: a character who enjoys a high reputation whose fall is due to an error, not deliberate wrongdoing.
- Peripeteia and anagnorisis: peripeteia is the moment at which events of the play turn in an unexpected direction for the protagonist. The moment of reversal may coincide with the protagonist's moment of recognition (or anagnorisis).
- Pity: one of the emotions the audience experiences through tragic drama.
- Tragic ('fatal') flaw: the tragedy is a result of a flaw in the psychological make-up of the protagonist.
- Catharsis: from the Greek word meaning 'purgation', the emotional experience of the audience at the end of a tragedy.

Arthur Miller: 'Tragedy and the Common Man', *New York Times* (1949)

It is time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time – the heart and spirit of the average man. […] The commonest of men may take on … stature to the extent of his willingness to throw all he has into the contest, the battle to secure his rightful place in the world.

Sean McEvoy et al: *Tragedy – A Student Handbook* (2009)

The 20th-century protagonist is devoted to the fulfilment of his or her own personal ideal or the following of his or her own beliefs. The cost of that fulfilment upon themselves and society is often at the heart of the tragedy.

Simon Goldhill: *Love, Sex and Tragedy – Why Classics Matters* (2004)

The emotional and intellectual power of tragedy stems from the very difficulty of its examples. The figures of tragedy are not black-and-white villains and heroes, but complex characters locked into double binds of doubt and compulsion, wilfulness and loss […] Tragedy leads to self-questioning through the pain of others.

Statements

1. It reduces the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* to think of it only in terms of a single flaw.
2. Blanche moves from self-awareness and knowledge to delusion so the play is not tragic in a classic sense.
3. The play helps us redefine what we mean by tragedy.
4. In this play there is not one single tragic hero: Stanley is as much the tragic hero of the play as is Blanche.
5. *A Streetcar Named Desire* shows us that ordinary people are just as much the subject of tragedy as the nobility.
6. Scene 11 elevates *A Streetcar Named Desire* from melodrama into tragedy.

Included on pages 68-69 are seven extracts from critics, reviews, Tennessee Williams himself and director Elia Kazan, each focusing on *A Streetcar Named Desire* in relation to tragedy.

- Skim read the extracts and choose one or two to focus on. (You might, for example, choose two extracts which raise interestingly different or conflicting ideas.)
- Re-read your extract(s), this time engaging with it critically in the ways suggested here.
  - Highlight any short phrases which strike you as particularly illuminating or provocative.
  - Use ticks, crosses, question marks and exclamation marks to indicate your response.
  - Make marginal comments, questioning, challenging or furthering the interpretation.
  - Choose one aspect of the extract to feedback in class discussion.

1. Tennessee Williams: Letter to Elia Kazan (1947)

It is a tragedy with the classic aim of producing a catharsis of pity and terror and in order to do that, Blanche must finally have the understanding and compassion of the audience. This without creating a black-dyed villain in Stanley. It is a thing (Misunderstanding) not a person (Stanley) that destroys her in the end. In the end you should feel – 'If only they had known about each other.' [...]

Blanche is not an angel without a flaw and Stanley's not evil. I know you're used to clearly stated themes, but this play should not be loaded one way or the other. Don't try to simplify things [...] Don't take sides or try to present a moral.

2. Elia Kazan: from the Notebooks (1947) in *Kazan on Directing* ed Robert Cornfield (2010)

This is a poetic tragedy, not a realistic, naturalistic one. [...] If this is a romantic tragedy, what is its inevitability and what is the tragic flaw? In the Aristotelian sense, the flaw is the need to be superior/special, or her need for protection and what it means to her, the 'tradition'. This creates an intense solitude. A loneliness so gnawing that only a complete breakdown, a refusal, as it were, to contemplate what she's doing, a destruction of all standards, only a desperate violent ride on the streetcar named Desire can break through the walls of her tradition. Inevitably, the tragic flaw creates the circumstances that destroy her. […] A tragedy is where a character is doomed by the inevitable contradiction in her character. Blanche's character makes it impossible for her to achieve the one thing she wants and needs most in the world: a home and protection, and the support of another. Rather, and inevitably, she strives to accomplish her death. She is doomed in this society…. The more I work on Blanche, incidentally, the less insane she seems. She is caught in a fatal inner contradiction, but in another society, she would work; in Stanley's society, no.

This is like a classic tragedy. Blanche is Medea or someone pursued by the Harpies, the Harpies being *her own nature*. Her inner sickness pursues her like doom and makes it impossible for her to attain the one things she needs, the only thing she needs: a safe place.

3. Theodore H Parker: *Hartford Courant* (1st November 1947)

In a rowdy quarter of New Orleans, he has assembled coarse and noisy clowns who live gustily around the center and creature of tragedy. He has written this background with finely imaginative realism, and salt humors, creating a play that is quick with life as well as with death. And against this background the tragedy of the woman's last desperate stand for decency is only more ironic and poignant.

What in this rehearsing must seem like a combination of melodrama and brisk comedy, is saved from these merenesses by the infinite tenderness, the deep understanding and ever present glow of poetry with which Mr Williams has probed his characters and set out their lives […] *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a deeply touching deeply moving, superior perception and exhilarating playmaking.

4. Eliot Norton: *Boston Post* (5th November, 1947)

A Streetcar Named Desire is a play of primitive power and fury, ugly as sin and lunacy can make it, lunging erratically along the line between melodrama and tragedy, grimly humourless, pitiless and sordid, yet as fascinating, much of the time, as the evil it chronicles.

5. Eliot Norton: *Boston Post* (9th November, 1947)

The matter of compassion is important. Unless this play has heart, there is no excuse for it. Tragedy which purges the emotions is one thing; the kind of melodrama which merely shocks and outrages is something else. Without pity, this play is a scandalous thing despite all the vivid fascination of its graphically drawn people.

6. Sean McEvoy et al: *Tragedy – A Student Handbook* (2009)

The tragedy in this play […] lies not in personal circumstances, but in the lives and losses of the culture and society itself. In the final scene Eunice, comforting Stella, says that 'Life has got to go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going.' As the play ends, the men return to their cards and Stella receives her baby from Eunice. Life and the community are still going to go on. In the face of great struggles this must always be the case and here, in this melting pot of people trying to better themselves, Williams is showing us that just to carry on is sometimes the hardest, most tragic thing of all [...]

His plays deal in a modern, social kind of tragedy – the tragedy of relationships in turmoil, of lovers on the edge, of ambitions thwarted, of families in despair.

7. George Jean Nathan: *The New York Journal American* (1947)

The borderline between the unpleasant and the disgusting is […] a shadowy one, as inferior playwrights have at times found out to their surprise and grief. Williams has managed to keep his play wholly in hand. But there is, too, a much more positive borderline between the unpleasant and the enlightening, and he has tripped over it, badly. While he has succeeded in making realistically dramatic such elements as sexual abnormality, harlotry, perversion, seduction and lunacy, he has scarcely contrived to distil from them any elevation and purge. His play as a consequence remains largely a theatrical shocker which, while it may shock the emotions of its audience, doesn't in the slightest shock them into any spiritual education.

Exploring Structure

11 scenes – a seamless whole or disconnected episodes?

The conventional way of structuring a play is to divide it into large units called acts and smaller units called scenes. Shakespeare's tragedies have five acts. Many other plays follow a three-act structure. The diagram on page 71 shows how you might analyse the structure of these two typical play forms.

Although an audience in the theatre isn't shown the end of one act and beginning of the next in the same way as a reader is, Steve Waters' comment below suggests this structure is vital to the play's meaning.

> Acts are the largest units of representation within the play, and give form to the great sweeps of thought that underlie the action. There's an excitement that accompanies the end of an act – the curtailment of the action, the lurch forward into an unknown future. The act break is an opportunity for the playwright to exploit surprise.
>
> *Steve Waters: The Secret Life of Plays (2010)*

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, however, there are no act divisions. The play is divided into 11 scenes. As the stage directions (although not the dialogue) make clear, these scenes take place at four different points over a six-month period. In the original theatre production there were intervals after Scenes 4 and 6. (The number in brackets refers to the length of each scene in pages, in the Penguin Classics edition.)

Scenes 1-4 Consecutive days in May

1. Evening in early May (16 pages)
2. 6pm the next day (11½ pages)
3. Later the same evening (12½ pages)
4. Early the following morning (9 pages)

Scenes 5-6 August evening

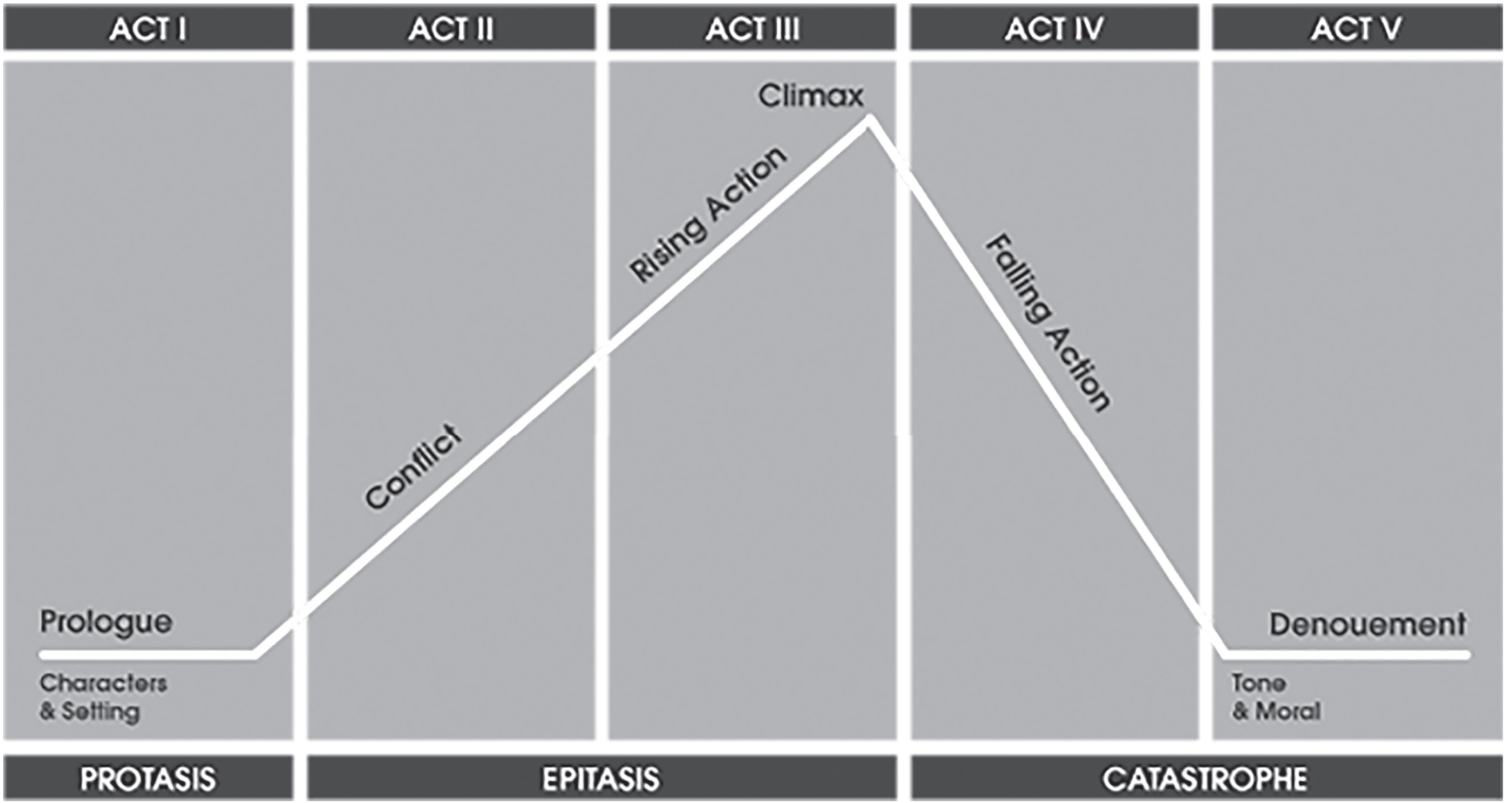
5. August evening (10 pages)
6. 2am the same night (9½ pages)

Scenes 7-10 September 15th (Blanche's birthday)

7. Mid-September, late evening (7½ pages)
8. Three-quarters of an hour later (7 pages)
9. A while later that evening (7½ pages)
10. A fewer hours later that night (8 pages)

Scene 11

11. Some weeks later (10½ pages)



(Protasis – the introductory part of a play; epitasis – the main action of the play; catastrophe – the final resolution.)

The obvious questions are:

- Why did Williams decide not to divide the play into acts? (In *Sweet Bird of Youth*, another of his plays, Williams does follow the convention of the act so it looks like it was a deliberate decision not to in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.)
- What is the effect of his decision on the meaning of the play and how it is experienced on the page and on the stage?

- Explore these questions as a class. To focus your discussion you could discuss where you would place the act divisions in a 3-act and 5-act version of the play. Despite the absence of formal act divisions, does the play conform to either structure? Or does it have a different underlying structure?

Some critics have argued that each of the scenes is like a one-act play, resulting in an episodic feel. Others have interpreted the effect rather differently, arguing that the absence of act divisions creates a much more fluid structure.

Where do you stand on this debate?

- Read the three critical snippets below, then choose the one you most agree with and explain why.

Tischler in K. Weiss, K. (ed): *A Student Handbook to the Plays of Tennessee Williams* (2014)

The plot is simple. It moves from hope and frustration to destruction and despair. The characters themselves provide probability for every action […] Each scene is constructed like a one-act play, Williams' forte.

Patricia Hern in K. Weiss, K. (ed): *A Student Handbook to the Plays of Tennessee Williams* (2014)

The play's tension and energy come from the audience's growing awareness of the past rising inexorably to the surface where it will erupt explosively into the present; it is this which gives Streetcar its sense of being purposeful.

MC reviewing the Italian première in P. Kolin: *A Streetcar Named Desire – Plays in Production* (2008)

The little episodes that follow one another without any psychological connection […] are at the level of the cinematic; *Streetcar* offers only a series of notes, random aspects of an environment colored too often by banal dialogue and by useless vulgar language.

Blanche's tragedy – a way of thinking about structure

One interesting way of thinking about the structural organisation and development of the play is in terms of what each scene contributes to the whole.

Director Elia Kazan forced himself to pin down what each scene adds to the play, focusing his interpretation on Blanche. His notes are reproduced below.

- Read and share your thoughts on his definition of each scene. What do you think of his structure? How does it compare to your thinking about the structure of the play, as revealed in your titles?
- In Kazan's structure the play is represented in terms of Blanche. Does it reveal her as the active agent in her story or is she acted upon?

> An effort to put poetic names on scenes to edge me into stylisations and physicalisations. Try to keep each scene in terms of Blanche.
>
> 1. Blanche comes to the last stop at the end of the line.
> 2. Blanche tries to make a place for herself.
> 3. Blanche breaks them [Stanley and Stella] apart, but when they come together, Blanche is more alone than ever!
> 4. Blanche, more desperate because more excluded, tries the direct attack and creates the enemy who finishes her.
> 5. Blanche finds that she is being tracked down for the kill. She must work fast.
> 6. Blanche suddenly finds Mitch, suddenly makes for the only possible, perfect man for her.
> 7. Happy only for a moment, Blanche comes out of the bathroom to find that her doom has caught up with her.
> 8. Blanche fights her last fight. Breaks down. Even Stella deserts her.
> 9. Blanche's last desperate effort to save herself by telling the whole truth. The truth dooms her.
> 10. Blanche escapes out of this world. She is brought back by Stanley and destroyed.
> 11. Blanche is disposed of.
>
> *Elia Kazan: from the Notebooks (1947) published as Kazan on Directing (ed Robert Cornfield)*

Of the 11 scenes, nine end with Blanche centre stage. Only Scenes 4 and 11 are different.

- Did you notice this? What is the effect of ending each scene with Blanche? What is the effect of breaking this pattern in Scenes 4 and 11?

Williams' Use of Repetition

Many writers, not only playwrights, make use of repetition to draw attention to a particular theme or to set up an echo across the text. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* Williams makes a particular feature of it. Words, phrases, images, refrains, music, sound effects, the telling of stories and events are all repeated across individual scenes and the play.

The repetition achieves a number of different things:

- It is one of the ways in which the 11 scenes are 'glued' together (or cohere) into a single play.
- It sets up echoes and reverberations across the play.
- It builds up a strand of the story, bit by bit, increasing its power and impact.
- It increases suspense.
- It shapes and directs the audience response.
- It develops and dramatises themes.
- It contributes to and moves the plot forward.
- It can act as an ironic commentary on something that has happened earlier.

Use these ideas to help you fill in the table below.

Type of repetition & example	Your example	What function does it fulfil?
Events (e.g. characters going on a night out)		
Musical motifs (e.g. the blue piano)		
A refrain (e.g. 'It wouldn't be make believe, if you believed in me')		
Images which take on a symbolic meaning (e.g. light)		
The telling of a story (e.g. the loss of Belle Reve)		
A single word repeated in a speech or key scene (e.g. 'Oh' in Scene 10)		

Exploring Williams' Style

In *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, the academic Felicia Hardison Londré suggests *A Streetcar Named Desire* 'might be read as a compendium of his characteristic dramaturgy, verbal and visual language and thematic preoccupations'.

(Dramaturgy: the art of dramatic composition and theatrical representation on stage.)

Some of the characteristic preoccupations she mentions include:

- episodic structure
- lyricism of dialogue
- atmosphere interspersed by comedy
- psychological realism of characterisation
- striking departure from realism in the staging
- evocatively charged use of scenic elements, props, sound effects, gestures and linguistic motifs
- focus on characters who are psychically wounded or otherwise marginalised by mainstream society
- characters seeking lost purity or escape from the ravages of time or refuge from an uncomprehending world
- simple human contact.

- Which of these characteristic preoccupations would you say are most important in the creation of the play's meaning and effect? How does Williams use the dramatic composition, the representation on stage, the language to explore the thematic preoccupations?

A leaf out of Blanche's notebook – investigating speech in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

In Scene 5 Blanche exclaims:

> I must jot that down in my notebook. Ha-ha! I'm compiling a notebook of quaint little words and phrases I've picked up here.

In this activity you are going to take a leaf out of Blanche's notebook and investigate Williams' use of language to create character. How distinctive is the dialogue in *A Streetcar Named Desire*? How easy is it to distinguish between the different characters from the way they speak as well as what they say?

Included on pages 76-77 are short extracts of dialogue from the main characters in *A Streetcar Named Desire*: Blanche, Stanley, Stella and Eunice, one of the more significant minor characters.

- Sort the extracts into the different characters and note down the reasons for your decisions. Compare your decisions across the class, pooling the features you used to identify the dialogue as belonging to a particular character. Were there any of the extracts which were more difficult to place or which you identified as belonging to the wrong character? If so, consider why this might have been.

(The speakers of each extract are identified in the Notes on page 4.)

1.	Oh, let me think, if only my mind would function!

2.	You're damn tootin' I'm going to stay here.

3.	Quit that howling out there an' go back to bed!

4.	What's a matter with Eun-uss?

5.	Sure, honey. Why don't you set down?

6.	You hear me? I said stand up! You messy child, you, you've spilt something on the pretty white lace collar!

7.	I, I, *I* took the blows in my face and my body! All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard!

8.	It *will*! It will, honey, it *will* … But don't take another drink!

9.	Here I am, all freshly bathed and scented, and feeling like a brand-new human being!

10.	It looks to me like you have been swindled, baby, and when you're swindled under the Napoleonic code I'm swindled *too*. And I don't like to be *swindled*.

11.	All right; now, Mr. Kowalski, let us proceed without any more double-talk.

12.	You stinker! You whelp of a Polack, you! I hope they do haul you in and turn the fire hose on you, same as the last time!

13.	Aren't you being a little intense about it? It's not that bad at all! New Orleans isn't like other cities.

14.	You are as fresh as a daisy.

15.	I got an acquaintance who deals in this sort of merchandise. I'll have him in here to appraise it. I'm willing to bet you there's thousands of dollars invested in this stuff here!

16.	Well, well, well. I see you boys are still at it!

17.	Drunk – drunk – animal thing, you! All of you – please go home! If any of you have one spark of decency in you –

18.	I done nothing to no one. Let go of my shirt. You've torn it.

19.	Get off the table, Mitch. Nothing belongs on a poker table but cards, chips and whisky.

20.	I said I am not in anything that I have a desire to get out of.

21.	Look who's coming! My Rosenkavalier! Bow to me first! [...] Now present them! […] Ahhh – Merciiii!

22.	Hello! The Little Boys' Room is busy right now.

23.	It's sort of messed up right now but when it's clean it's real sweet.

24.	You ain't pulling the wool over my eyes! I wouldn't mind if you'd stay down at the Four Deuces, but you always going up.

A focus on one character

- Choose one of the main characters (Blanche, Stella, Stanley or Mitch) and identify what it is that makes the character's speech distinctive, using the prompts below.
  - Words, expressions and particular grammatical structures which the character typically uses (their idiolect). Does the character use language drawn from a particular lexical field, for example?
  - The difference between the character's speech and that of other characters. Is the character's language foregrounded by being very different from the language of the other characters?
  - Anything which stands out – or is foregrounded – as being rather different from the character's usual way of speaking (for example, Stanley's use of legal language when speaking to Blanche in Scene 2).
  - Shifts across the play and why this might be.

A different discourse – exploring the stage directions

Drama texts are characterised by their use of two different discourses: dialogue and stage directions. As you have already discovered, the stage directions in *A Streetcar Named Desire* play a particularly significant role. Here's what the critic H. Sambrook said:

> At times, it seems almost as if Tennessee Williams the lyricist, hemmed in by the exigencies of a more or less realistic plot, feels free to burst out joyfully in his stage directions where he can use his own poetic voice.

- Discuss your response to this comment. What do you think this different discourse adds to the play?

You are reading the play and so have direct access to Williams' directions. An audience in the theatre does not: for them, the stage directions are evident only as they are translated into the set, score, performance and so on.

- As a class, discuss the implications of this, using the statements below.

1. Reading the play is a richer experience than seeing it on stage.
2. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is more like a novel than a play.
3. The stage directions offer a challenge to the director and actors.
4. Williams' directions ensure all productions of *A Streetcar Named Desire* reflect his original conception.
5. The stage directions need not be read literally by a director – they are expressionistic, not realistic.

Style – Highly Realist, Highly Figurative

From the very earliest reviews onwards, reviewers and commentators have noted the way that Williams' writing brings together naturalistic dialogue with the use of metaphor, symbols and motifs in both the stage directions and the dialogue in Williams' writing.

- Read the comments on Williams' style, below.

1. Edwin H Schloss: *Philadelphia Enquirer* (November 18th 1947)

Set in a sordid two-room apartment in the tenement section of New Orleans, it is written with realism that rises to poetry.

2. Tony Kushner in conversation with Elana Estrin: *Cultural Compass* (May 19th 2011)

Williams, much more than any other American playwright, succeeded in finding a poetic diction for the stage. I immediately identified with that ambition, with the desire to write language that simultaneously sounded like spontaneous utterance but also had the voluptuousness in daring, peculiarity, quirkiness and unapologetic imagistic density of poetry. Also, because it is a written language, the tension between artifice, naturalism and spontaneity in art has always been exciting to me. I felt that I experienced in really viscerally in terms of American playwriting first in Tennessee Williams' writing. […]

Streetcar has maybe the most beautiful passages of stage English written by an American. It's just endlessly, endlessly glorious, heartbreaking, rich and complex.

- In pairs, talk about what you understand by these comments on the play. Do you agree that in the language of *A Streetcar Named Desire* Williams brings together realism and poetry? If so, look through the play to find an example to present to the class. If not, try to explain your view of Williams' language in the play.

Blanche and Stanley – using linguistic analysis

Blanche and Stanley are most frequently seen as antagonists. They are presented as rivals over the affection and loyalty of Stella, who represent opposing values, behaviours, even different periods of American history. These oppositions are seen in Williams' dramatising of the way they speak, as well as in what they say.

- In pairs talk about your views of this critical view of Stanley and Blanche. Is it convincing?

The two levels of discourse, Blanche's evocative, diffuse, evasive language and Stanley's direct, seemingly factual speech, point to a distinction based on gender and class.

Anca Vlasopolos: 'Authorizing History: Victimisation in A Streetcar Named Desire', Theatre Journal 38 (1986)

In the *emagazine* article on page 80, David Kinder uses linguistic analysis – including conversation analysis – to look in detail at the way Williams dramatises the relationship between Stanley and Blanche.

- Read the article and discuss the ideas it raises.

The Language of Stanley and Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

The dynamic opposition between Blanche and Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is one of the most important forces in the play. Williams creates and maintains an antipathy and tension between them so that, despite the audience's horror at what Stanley does to Blanche in Scene 10, the fact that there is a final clash between the two characters comes as no surprise to us. Stanley's gruesome boast to Blanche before the rape, 'we've had this date with each other from the beginning', whilst shocking, is also a neat comment on the way Williams has structured the play.

How, though, does Williams achieve this powerful combination of attraction and repulsion? He does it by much more than playing up the sexual chemistry of this pair, vital though that is. Their dynamic relationship is woven into their language, from their first encounter to their last. So much so, in fact, that taking a linguistic approach – and most usefully a sociolinguistic one – to studying the dialogue of Blanche and Stanley could provide us with revealing insights into the subtlety and depth of Williams' writing.

Sociolinguistics deals with the ways in which society helps to shape language. Work in this area has spawned a number of fascinating concepts and terms. There is not space here to look at sociolinguistics in depth, but the following could well help us in studying the relationship between these two characters:

1. Idiolect. This is the language that is particular to one individual, formed by where they live, their education, their family, their class and so on.
2. Sociolect. A sociolect is the distinctive language of a particular social group. If, for example, you identify with a particular group of students who adopt a particular set of language terms then you would be adopting a sociolect.
3. Accommodation theory. The linguist Howard Giles (Language: Contexts and Consequences, 1991) looked at how we adapt our language to fit particular social situations and called the process accommodation. When you go to an interview, for example, if the interviewer is talking in Standard English with little slang, you may find yourself accommodating, or converging, with the interviewer rather than sticking to the version of English you might have been using earlier in the day with your friends. However, if you are in a situation where you dislike the way you are being treated by someone with a higher status than you, you may well diverge away from their version of English, perhaps talking in non-standard English to help make your dissatisfaction more apparent.

It is not hard to see how, in principle, Blanche and Stanley would stand up to this analysis. They are socially very different, as the play makes clear:

STELLA:... Blanche and I grew up under very different circumstances than you did.

STANLEY: So I been told. And told and told and told!

Blanche identifies, either artfully or genuinely (we are never quite sure), with a fading genteel Southern States aristocracy and Stanley with the working men with whom he plays poker. They are also strongly conditioned to their respective genders (one loves the frilliest of dresses, the other poker and bowling). It is possible that they come from very different educational backgrounds: Blanche certainly assumes an educated stance, telling Mitch of her struggles to teach the classic American poets to high school students, and Stanley is referred to as not having 'the stamp of genius'. All of this surely makes the examination of their idiolects and sociolects worthwhile. The linguistic contrast between these two characters strongly reflects the dramatic conflict between them.

Let's take Scene 2 as a useful focus – the first time Blanche and Stanley meet and thus the point at which Williams is developing the relationship for the audience.

In writing Blanche's dialogue in this scene, Williams is trying to convey someone who, despite her new-found poverty, still inhabits, or makes a pretence of inhabiting, the well-to-do world of her youth. At times her language is quite ornate. She has a tendency to use more elaborate vocabulary where simpler or shorter words would do (for example, 'improvident' for careless and 'fornications' for sex). This is either an affectation or truly indicates her education and we can see it as either her genuine idiolect or a well-

constructed pretend version of it. When interrogated by Stanley about the cost of her 'fur-pieces' she says that they were 'a tribute from an admirer of mine'. The choice of the word 'tribute' instead of 'present' here evokes a bygone world of gallantry where men 'wooed' women in high society. We might say, here, that Blanche is producing language from a sociolect which is no longer around her, but with which she wants to have herself identified. Williams is carefully constructing a woman with distinct linguistic traits which are very different from Stanley's.

Stanley's language, by contrast, is blunt and tends towards slang. He tells Blanche that he once 'went out with a doll'. The term 'doll' gives a clear indication of Stanley's basic sexual objectification of women. (Blanche later uses the much more genteel and Southern States term 'beau' to describe an old boyfriend.) Such terms are part of Stanley's idiolect, since they are typical of him, but probably also common currency among his social group. Likewise with the word 'stuff', which he uses three times in this scene: to mean behaviour ('all this Hollywood glamour stuff'), paper ('that stuff people write on') and pretence ('don't pull that stuff'). We see a character who would rather use a catch-all term than show a more expanded vocabulary. Thus Williams has set up a polarity in the idiolect and sociolect of the two characters which underpins the action.

When we focus on the sentence constructions of the two characters we find further distinctions. As well as Blanche's euphemistic expression and sophisticated vocabulary she also tends to use Standard English of a kind which would not look out of place in a formal written context. 'These are love letters' she says of a sheaf of paper Stanley points to, 'yellowing with antiquity, all from one boy.' This sentence is full, with no elisions (she uses 'They are', not the more common 'they're'), with the modifying 'yellowing with antiquity' in parenthesis – sandwiched between the beginning and the end of the sentence. Blanche is under threat in this scene, as her actions over the sale of Belle Reve are being explored by Stanley. It may well be that Blanche is diverging from Stanley, deliberately keeping her language formal to distance herself from him. This suggests a kind of act, and perhaps it is, but it is an act in which we all often take part, adapting our language to the social context at hand.

This divergence seems to be happening in Stanley's dialogue too. In many of his lines he uses non-standard constructions: 'you was my wife's sister'; 'What's them papers?'. There are a number of linguistic studies which suggest that working-class males have a tendency to diverge from Standard English in this way in certain situations. They are, linguists suggest, identifying with their social group and showing lack of interest or even hostility for 'prestige' forms of English. Stanley could be seen as doing just this with Blanche, separating himself from her linguistically. For us, as the audience, his divergent language acts as a reflection of his hostility to her and everything she stands for. Thus it seems clear that Williams has built the opposition of these two characters into the fabric of the writing.

Of course it would be simplistic to suggest that the characters' language is rigidly polarised in this way in every line. When the two characters are attempting to be pleasant to each other their language does converge. When they are first alone, before the atmosphere starts to turn sour, Blanche uses a more down-to-earth language, such as her request, 'May I have a drag on your cig?' It is quite a quaint expression, but you do nonetheless sense a character who is either attempting to accommodate her language to another, or is dropping the pretence that they were ever that far apart. Later in the play, meanwhile, at the beginning of Scene 10, Stanley is apparently civil to Blanche, offering her a drink which he refers to as a 'loving cup'. This more poetic idiom is not part of his normal idiolect, and could be seen as momentary convergence.

For the most part, however, the linguistic difference – real or contrived – between the two characters is clear to see. One or other of the influences of their gender, class, education and social group, or an assumption of them, is apparent in every line that they say. So, whilst it would be odd to assume that Williams plotted out the scenes between them with an eye on linguistic theory (most of which had not been written at that time) and whilst as literature students we must be wary of applying linguistic terms too liberally to a play, the evidence is there all the same. A study of their idiolect, sociolect and the way they fail to accommodate to one another's linguistic needs shows us clearly that the clash that will so shock the audience at the end of the play is there in the language from the very beginning.

David Kinder, emagazine 2010

Williams' Dramatic Art

- Read the quotations below.

David Edgar: *How Plays Work* (2009)

Dramatic devices go to the very heart of what the theatre is. Some (though not all) devices seek to confront what looks like theatre's biggest problem: its difficulty is showing what goes on inside people's heads. […] The whole point of the theatre is to make the invisible visible.

David Edgar: *How Plays Work* (2009)

What I like about [theatre] is its 'theatreness', the properties that make it distinct from any other medium – its use of time, of space, of light, of music, of movement, of storytelling. Theatre is intrinsically poetic, it thrives on metaphor.

Thomas P. Adler: *A Streetcar Named Desire: The Moth and the Lantern* (1990)

A further distinction that sets *Streetcar* apart […] is Williams' ability to capture something of the complexity of the novel within the dramatic form.

Benedict Andrews, director of the Young Vic production (2014)

The play is written on this borderline between the real and illusion: the fundamentals of theatre. The mythic is one space of theatre, and the tangible is another.

Felicia Hardison Londré: 'Poetry in the Plumbing: Stylistic Clash and Reconciliation in Recent American Stagings of A Streetcar Named Desire, *Cercles* 10 (2004)

Skilful incorporation of different levels of reality in an essentially 'realistic' drama is another of the play's accomplishments.

- In pairs, consider how these quotations apply to Williams' dramatic art as seen in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.
  - How does he make the 'invisible visible'?
  - Is his drama 'intrinsically poetic'? Does it 'thrive on metaphor'?
  - What devices does Williams use to show 'what goes on inside people's heads'?

Plastic theatre

Williams discussed his dramatic art – what he termed 'plastic theatre' – in the production notes to his first full play, *The Glass Menagerie,* and in a letter to the critic Eric Bentley in 1948. The critic William Kramer wrestles with what Williams meant by the term – and what it means for the way we approach his plays. Extracts from all three discussions are included on page 83.

- Read both Williams' notes and Kramer's account.
- Write up what you have learned in one of these ways.
  - A display for the classroom.
  - A short presentation to a new AS class.
  - An entry for a blog.

1. Tennessee Williams: Production Notes for *A Glass Menagerie* (1945)

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 that 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.

These remarks are not meant as a preface only to this particular play. They have to do with a conception of new, plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as a part of our culture.

2. Williams' Letter to Eric Bentley (1948)

The extra-verbal or non-literary elements of the theatre, the various plastic elements, the purely visual things such as light and movement and color and design, which play, for example, such a tremendously important part in theatre … and which are as much a native part of drama as words and ideas are … I have read criticism in which the use of transparencies and music and subtle lighting effects, which are often as meaningful as pages of dialogue, were dismissed as 'cheap tricks and devices'. Actually all of these plastic things are as valid instruments of expression in the theatre as words …

3. Richard E Kramer: *The Sculptural Drama: Tennessee Williams' Plastic Theatre* (2002)

Williams is referring to a drama that was more than just a picture of reality: he insists that his ideal theatre make use of all the stage arts to generate a theatrical experience greater than mere Realism. […] [H]is plays are very theatrical: his language is lyrical and poetic; his settings, 'painterly' and 'sculptural'; and his dramaturgy, cinematic. His scenic descriptions draw on metaphors from the world of art and painting, and his use of sound and light is symbolic and evocative, not just realistic in its effects. […]

Williams, already working with a three-dimensional stage, wanted a truly multi-dimensional theatre, integrating all the arts of the stage to create its effects. He did not want language to be the principal medium of his theatre, merely supported by a picture-frame set and enhanced by music and lighting effects. […] Williams wanted all the so-called production elements traditionally added by the director and designers to be co-equal aspects of the play and part of the playwright's creative process. [...] Williams envisioned a theatre which begins with the playwrights who create the theatrical experience in the script because they are not just composing words, but theatrical images.

In a sense, Williams was harking back to the original etymological meaning of playwright. The word, we note, is not playwrite—it is more than a mere writer of plays. The Oxford English Dictionary provides one definition of wright as 'a constructive workman' and we still have the obsolete noun in words like wheelwright, shipwright, millwright, and cartwright – craftsmen who construct wheels, ships, mills, or carts. The obsolete verb wright, in fact, means 'to build' or 'to construct' as we can deduce from the past participle, the only form of the verb that we still use. Wrought, according to the OED, means 'that is made or constructed by means of labour or art; fashioned, formed'; before that, it meant simply 'created; shaped, moulded.' […] In other words, Williams was envisioning dramatists who, rather than just writing scripts, wrought them from all the materials that were available in the theatrical lumberyard. […] In its simplest terms, then, a plastic theatre is a theatrical theatre as opposed to a literary (or literal) one.

The First Production – Williams, Kazan, Mielziner

Williams was himself closely involved in the first production, so it's interesting to see how his stage directions and ideas were translated into a theatrical set.

Drawing on Williams' letters and Elia Kazan's notebooks, as well as descriptions of the first production, the academic Brenda Murphy has explored in detail the move from reading script to the production on stage. (The production still on page 85 shows Jo Mielziner's set for the first stage production.)

1. The translation of Williams' stage directions into the set

- Read the descriptions of the stage set below.
  - Talk about why you think these decisions were made.
  - Look back into the play to find specific passages where you think the meaning might be created by or reflected in this staging.

1. Jo Mielziner: *Designing for the Theatre* (1965) quoted in Philip C. Kolin: *Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire – Plays in Production* (2008)

When I designed *Streetcar*, I used translucent walls that could be made to appear by the skilled use of light and focus the attention of the audience on only one section of the stage at a given moment. The magic of light opened up a fluid and poetic world of storytelling – selective light that revealed or concealed, advanced a set or made it recede.

Throughout the play the brooding atmosphere is like an impressionistic X-ray. We are always conscious of the skeletons in this house of terror.

In almost all the scenes I used a carefully controlled spotlight on the principals, not as an obvious follow-spot' but a subtle heightening of the faces of those who dominated the scene.

2. Philip C. Kolin: *Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire – Plays in Production* (2008)

Up to the challenge, Mielziner translated Williams' script into the sights, sounds, and moods of the Broadway première. Mielziner's crowning achievement was that he discovered in the Streetcar script the unique visual metaphors – the stage language – defining the production. He did this by successfully capturing the stark realism of the Kowalski apartment as well as the illusory world Blanche inhabits without privileging either a realist or expressionistic theatre, thus being faithful to Kazan's stylized realism. […]

As he had done with Menagerie, Mielziner radically departed from the rigid conventions of a proscenium arch (or boxed) stage. Responsible for ushering in an 'era of gauze', Mielziner created a transparent, painted scrim symbolizing the walls of the Kowalski apartment, with appliquéd windows, shutters, and a skylight.

3. Robert Cornfield (ed): *Kazan on Directing* (2010)

Kazan and Mielziner designed a steady beam of light (a follow spot), a halo of subjectivity, to focus on Blanche throughout the play 'in either blue or amber, depending on whether the light supposedly derived from daylight, moonlight, or candlelight'. It isolated Blanche from the other characters and from the action, suggesting her increasing panic and inability to separate fantasy from reality.

2. Blanche in Scene 1 – taking a character from page to stage

Remind yourself of the dialogue between Blanche and Stella in Scene 1 and any work you did on it.

- Drawing on your analysis, discuss how you might stage this dialogue to bring out your interpretation of the two characters and their relationship.
- Now read Brenda Murphy's account of the way Kazan directs Blanche's behaviour in a very short extract from Scene 1. What do you think is the effect of his direction?

> Blanche examined Stella's figure in order to compare it unfavourably with her own, and Stella, wanting to conceal the fact that she was pregnant, kept trying to stop her. When Blanche says, 'You hear me? I said stand up!', the pre-production script had Stella comply reluctantly. Instead Kazan had Blanche pull Stella to her feet and fuss with her sister's clothes and hair, complaining about Stella's having spilled something on her collar and about her haircut, and examining Stella's hands as commented on the fact that the Kowalskis didn't have a maid.
>
> *Brenda Murphy: Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan – A Collaboration in the Theatre (1992)*

- Choose another very short extract (for example, Blanche and Stanley's dialogue in Scene 2). What do you want to convey in this exchange? Drawing on evidence in the script, how would you direct the actors to behave?

3. Realist and expressionist staging – interpreting a scene

As Blanche gets more and more distressed in Scene 10, Williams' stage directions move further and further away from naturalism. Included on page 86 is an extract from Brenda Murphy's description of Kazan's staged version of this scene. It includes Williams' text for the 1947 production (known as the reading script).

- Read the directions from this reading script (presented in italics). Discuss your interpretation of what is happening here and how you might convey this on stage.
- Now read the whole of Brenda Murphy's account. Share your responses to this. How does it compare to your own ideas about staging?

Brenda Murphy: *Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan – A Collaboration in the Theatre* (1992)

The most significant change from an expressionistic to a naturalistic use of the environment came in Scene 10, when Blanche's sense of being caught in a trap reaches its climax. As Stanley finished his speech attacking Blanche for thinking she is 'Queen of the Nile', the pre-production script, like the reading version had:

lurid reflections appear on the wall around Blanche. The shadows are of a grotesque and menacing form.

Then Stanley went into the bathroom and closed the door while Blanche made her desperate call to Shep Huntleigh. In the middle of the call, Blanche asked the operator to hold on as the action moved into the subjective reality of her terror:

She sets the phone down and crosses warily into the kitchen. The night is filled with inhuman voices like the 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 sequinned bag which the prostitute had dropped on the walk. She is rooting excitedly through it.

Then she gives her frantic message to Western Union.

Blanche presses her knuckles to her lips and returns slowly to the phone. She speaks in a hoarse whisper. 'In desperate, desperate circumstances! Help me! Caught in a trap. Caught in –'

During rehearsals, this was replaced with a scene in which Blanche's menace came not from her psyche, but from the social reality of the environment where the Stanleys of the world hold sway. Instead of the overt indications that the action on the stage took place only in Blanche's disintegrating mind, the new version of the scene represented action that *could* be taking place only in Blanche's desperate imagination, but that also could and did take place often in the world of the Quarter. In the new version, Stanley went into the bathroom and slammed the door after his speech, pushing Blanche aside. At this point, a scream was heard offstage, along with the sound of excited murmuring from the street and the café. Terrified at the sounds, Blanche ran to the phone and dialled, while in the street a woman laughed insanely and ran into the street with a purse. A man in a tuxedo followed, protesting, and the woman struck him. He fell. As the noise rose, another man rushed on and attacked the first man from behind. The assailants vanished at the sound of police whistles and a siren. How much of this action may be assumed by the audience to be objectively real and how much is the subjective phenomenon of Blanche's mind was purposely left vague.

In the scene as it was played, Blanche put down the phone in the middle of her call, trembling, as a man ran into the street, followed by three thugs who attacked him and were joined by another man. There were police whistles. The men exited, and there was *'an excited murmur of their voices'.* The wounded man staggered off while Blanche grasped her jewel box and a couple of gowns from her trunk and went out onto the porch, where she came face to face with her muggers, just before they went out. Then she ran back into the apartment, knelt beside the phone and made her desperate call to Western Union. Here not only are Blanche's fears encoded through flesh-and-blood signifiers of the threatening environment of the Quarter, but she confronts them in the objective reality of the play's present. How closely her perception of these events matches what is 'really happening' is left ambiguous, leaving the subjective episteme inextricably intertwined with the objective for the audience rather than separating them clearly as expressionism does. The changes in this scene brought it within Kazan's conception of the play as a conflict of social realities without sacrificing the subjectivity that both he and Williams considered central to its nature.

Exploring Context – Issues of Censorship

While the stage play escaped censorship in the US, the film adaptation (screenplay by Tennessee Williams, directed by Elia Kazan), did not.

- In pairs, consider why the play might have attracted the attention of censors and those organisations concerned to uphold public morality. As well as looking back into your play text, you might find it helpful to look back at the before reading material about New Orleans and the American South when doing this (see pages 13-17).
- Share your thoughts as a class.

The Production Code of 1930

- In 1930 pressure from religious groups in American led to the establishment of the 'Production Code' – a form of self-regulation for the movie industry.
- The Code begins: 'No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin'.
- The Code outlined the things filmmakers should not express on screen: depictions of murder, detailed crime, sex, childbirth, adultery, sex 'perversion,' vulgarity, obscenity, profanity, nudity, explicit dancing, ridicule of religion, and unpatriotic feelings.
- By 1934, a Production Code seal of approval had become vital for box office success.

- In pairs, read the following information from the website 'Turner Classic Movies'. Talk about any insights you get into the play and the period in which it was written, set and staged.

In a April 28, 1950 letter, the MPAA office notified Warner Bros. that the script posed 'three principal problems' with regard to the Production Code. These problems were cited as 'an inference of sex perversion...[with] reference to the character of Blanche's young husband, Allan Grey, [as] there seems little doubt that this young man was a homosexual;' 'an inference of nymphomania with regards to the character of Blanche herself;' and the 'reference to the rape.' The MPAA offered various plot alterations to resolve these violations of the Production Code. In the first they suggested that the filmmakers 'affirmatively establish...some other reason for [Allan Grey's] suicide which will get away entirely from sex perversion.' Secondly, the MPAA suggested that Blanche appear to be 'searching for romance and security, and not for gross sex' and frequently call for 'Allan,' so that she would appear to be 'seeking for the husband she has lost in any man she approaches.' The MPAA also recommended that all inferences to the rape be entirely eliminated and merely be Blanche's hallucination, brought on by her 'dementia.' In a May 2, 1950 memo, the MPAA noted that both Kazan and Williams were telephoned after receiving their comments, and 'were inclined to make speeches about the integrity of their art and their unwillingness to be connected with a production which would emasculate the validity of their production [...].'

Negotiation continued between the MPAA and the filmmakers; however, a May 24, 1950 note written by Joseph I. Breen, head of the MPAA, noted that 'we are not entirely out of the woods on this particular production....we still have some things to do by way of straightening out the characterization of the girl and the disposal of Stanley at the end of the script.' A July 25, 1950 memo recorded a meeting between the MPAA and Warner Bros. representatives, in which they specifically discussed the 'so-called rape scene,' which the MPAA continued to reject. 'A solution was suggested...that the indication of rape be simply abolished, and that in its place it be indicated that Stanley struck Blanche quite violently, and from this blow she collapsed. This would mean that his very pointed line, 'We've had this date with each other from the beginning,' would be simply eliminated.'

Criticism

Critical nuggets

You will be working in pairs, with each pair focusing on a short piece of criticism about the play.

- Read the extract you have been given.
- Use the prompts below to help you talk about your piece of criticism and the impact it has on your interpretation of the text:
  - gives you fresh knowledge/information that's useful in helping you understand the play
  - further develops your interpretation of the play
  - opens up the play for you in a new and thought-provoking way
  - challenges your interpretation of the play.
- Individually, highlight one or two short phrases which you might use in an essay to develop your argument or interpretation of the play.
- Introduce your critical nugget to your partner, explaining why you have chosen it and the ways in which it illuminates the play.
- Go on to write a paragraph in which you incorporate the quotation into an exploration of an aspect of the play.

1. CWE Bigsby: *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century Drama* Vol 2 (2008)

Williams brought to the American theatre a striking blend of prosaic literalness and poetic yearning, half pathos and half genuine lyricism. Early in his career the lyricism dominated; later, the pathos. But no other playwright has created a world so distinctive or characters so compelling in their blend of self-regarding need and desperate courage.

2. Anca Vlasopolos: 'Authorizing History: Victimisation in *A Streetcar Named Desire*', *Theatre Journal* 38 (1986)

Blanche and Stanley are most frequently seen as antagonists. They are presented as rivals over the affection and loyalty of Stella, who represent opposing values, behaviours, even different periods of American history. These oppositions are seen in Williams' dramatising of the way they speak, as well as in what they say.

The struggle for mastery between the two rivals begins as soon as they share the stage. Blanche attempts to subdue Stanley through her Southern-belle flirtation, a convention which he does not entirely understand but through which he is easily able to cut. She uses even more provocative behavior when he begins his speech about the Napoleonic code, and again Stanley counters her move with the crude but effective 'Don't play so dumb'. Since Stanley's experience with flirts, women who overvalue their good looks, and those who give men 'ideas' about them seems vast, Blanche's tactics fail. She begins to gain ascendancy over him only when she uses a language to describe her past and the history of Belle Reve that takes her out of Stanley's ken, that makes her the woman about whom Mitch confesses, 'I have never known anyone like you'.

3. Tony Kushner in conversation with Elana Estrin (*Cultural Compass*, 2011)

They're social plays. They're not plays that are completely interior. There are ways in which *A Streetcar Named Desire* is timeless and there are also ways in which it's very much a play of the post-war era, about women's economic insecurity […] Blanche's desperation is the terror of someone who has absolutely no possibility because of what she's suffered and flaws in her character, if you can call them flaws. There are also beautiful things in her character: her emotional warmth, her carnality, her sensuality. These have all been turned into negatives by a society that's this creepy mix of post-war boosterism and old-south aristocratic decrepitude and decline. She's been ground to a pulp.

4. CV Terry: *New York Times* (1948)

Like all true drama, *Streetcar* is as simple as a figure in geometry, and follows the same ruthless line from the upbeat of its first crescendo. A Southern girl of 'good family,' happily married to an all- male, down-to-earth husband, takes in a destitute sister who has long since slipped over that hazy border when illusion and reality merge. With this classic conflict established in the first scene, Mr. Williams sends his actors driving through a series of sharply joined battles, never wasting a word, never avoiding melodrama in favor of 'realism' when melodrama springs from a character's heart. His dialogue is a joy to read, its surface crudity highlighting the understanding beneath – its curtain-tags striking the right note always.

Analysing a longer critical extract

- Use the following approach to help you get to grips with this longer, more challenging pieces of criticism.
  - Interrogate the text: annotate it with questions, tick (and double tick) interesting ideas, take a point and disagree with it.
  - Sum up the key point of each paragraph.
  - Turn over the text and explain to a partner the critic's main line of argument.

It was not until 1947, when Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened, that Broadway saw a play in which the bathroom figured so prominently in the setting, in the plot, and in the dialogue (including vocabulary like Stanley's crude reference to his 'kidneys').

While the plumbing that undergirds *A Streetcar Named Desire* may well be viewed as naturalistic, the play at the same time epitomizes Jacques Copeau's concept of a poésie de théâtre; that is, it deploys a visual poetry of scenic metaphor, alongside the verbal poésie au théâtre. For example, the clouds of steam that emanate from the bathroom whenever Blanche takes a refreshing bath are realistic, but the haze on stage also creates an atmospheric softening effect. In symbolist terms, the added humidity in the small apartment reifies the discomfort caused by Blanche's presence there. Williams' dramaturgical genius is evident in his making the Kowalski apartment's bathroom a source of signifiers for bodily functions that are the domain of naturalism while also exploiting it for all its potential symbolism and poetic overtones.

A third theatrical style, expressionism, manifests itself in the episodic structure of *A Streetcar Named Desire* as well as in the distortions of reality that scenically and sonically reflect Blanche's mental state. Some of those elements also have a basis in realism—the cat screeching in the alley, the clackety-clack of a passing train, the Mexican street vendors—but their juxtaposition with a precise emotional spike in Blanche's sensibility makes for a powerfully theatrical (virtually expressionistic) heightening of the moment. Most importantly, the polka music of the Varsouviana must be considered a clear departure from realism in that it is heard only by Blanche and by the audience. In productions that follow the stage directions in Williams' published text, the polka music underscores Blanche's monologue to Mitch about her young husband Allan Grey. She begins with the analogy of a blinding light that exposes something mysterious, and when she reaches the point in her narrative at which she unexpectedly walked in on the boy she married in a compromising situation with his older male friend, a locomotive thunders past and casts the glare of its headlight into the room. The polka music is heard in a minor key when Blanche recalls dancing with her husband as if nothing had been discovered. The music cuts off with her recollection of his dashing away from the dance floor followed by a gunshot. Then the polka resumes in a major key, increasing in volume with the confession of her cruelty toward him. Only when Mitch takes Blanche in his arms and kisses her does the polka tune fade out. Thus has external reality been distorted in order to bring to the fore the inner reality of Blanche's memory.

Directly or indirectly, the published text of the play in its didascalia [stage directions and non-verbal elements] calls for elements of naturalism, symbolism or poetic impressionism, and expressionism.1 Any play that must juggle or synthesize three quite distinct theatrical stylistic conventions as does *A Streetcar Named Desire* poses a challenge for its director, designers, and actors. How realistic or theatricalized is the overall work in which these three aesthetic approaches are embedded? Should there be a clear break between styles or should they blend seamlessly? How far should one push the stylized unreality of the lurid projections of Blanche's mind? Are the different styles tied to specific characters or should the various sound and lighting effects be orchestrated as elements within a larger dramatic poem?

The idea of polarizing the two dominant styles by tying Stanley Kowalski to brutal naturalism and Blanche DuBois to delicately poetic symbolism appeals to some directors. This approach reinforces stylistically the drastic incompatibilities of character, language, and thought between Stanley and Blanche. […]

There is no question that stylistic departures from realism are integral to Tennessee Williams' artistic intention. The question is whether modern audiences (as represented by these critics) are more limited in their willing suspension of disbelief than audiences were two generations ago. That is, have audiences lost their tolerance for theatricality, 'staginess,' or heightened effects within a play that employs a recognizably realistic storyline and character motivations? Is it possible that by moving Stanley's character away from naturalism toward a more complex psychological realism while moving Blanche in the opposite direction, away from poetic symbolism toward a more complex psychological realism—thus putting the two characters on the same stylistic plane—do the expressionistic effects become more dissonant than they would be if the performances were more polarised? […]

Even if we no longer admit a polarity between Stanley as ape and Blanche as delicate moth, Williams' experiments with drawing upon a range of stylistically varied elements are clear in his text on the page and thus deserve to be conveyed in some manner in the staging. Whether or not we apply the terminology of aesthetic movements—naturalism, symbolism, surrealism, expressionism—we can always find polarities in his dramatic writing, beginning with the poetry of his dialogue and atmosphere flowing through the plumbing that structures his plot even as it symbolizes the seamy side of human existence.

Poetry in the Plumbing: Stylistic Clash and Reconciliation in Recent American Stagings of A Streetcar Named Desire Cercles 10 (2004)

RESOURCES

Key Aspects Cards

The following cards are used in activities throughout this study guide to support students in developing their understanding of the play's meaning and Williams' dramatic style. You may also find them useful during the revision period, in the ways suggested here:

- sequencing
- turn over the card/just a minute
- quizzes
- find the quotation
- clustering and mind mapping.

(The cards are also included on the CD for ease of printing.)

Character cards

Blanche DuBois	**Stella Kowalski**	**Stanley Kowalski**
Harold Mitchell [Mitch]	**Eunice Hubbel**	**Steve Hubbel**
Pablo Gonzales	**Negro Woman**	**A Strange Man [Doctor]**
A Strange Woman [Nurse]	**A Young Collector**	**A Mexican Woman**
Allan Grey	**Shep**	**School Principal**

Stage business/dramatic devices

Off-stage action	**On-stage action**	**Music**
Entrances and exits	**Lighting effects**	**Sound effects**

Theme cards

Love	**Sex**	**Death**
Masculinity and femininity	**Money**	**Ethnicity**
Desire	**Loneliness**	**Time (past/present/future)**
Youth and age	**Reality and illusion**	**Fantasy**
Class	**Destiny/fate**	**Identity**
The South	**Home**	**Family**

Place cards

Belle Reve [family home of Blanche and Stella]	**Laurel**	**Weir**
The external staircase	**The Flamingo Hotel**	**New Orleans**
Desire [end of the tram line]	**Cemeteries [end of the tram line]**	**L & N tracks [railway]**
The Mississippi River	**Elysian Fields**	**The Bowling Club**
Four Deuces [club]	**Galatoires [restaurant]**	**Stella and Stanley's flat**
Eunice and Steve's flat	**The bedroom**	**The balcony**
The bathroom	**The main room**	**Blanche's put-up bed**

Event cards

The poker game	**The rape**	**Stella's baby is born**
The birthday meal	**Mitch and Blanche's night out**	**Blanche and Stella's night out**
The bowling game	**Blanche's arrival**	**Mitch confronts Blanche**
Steve and Eunice's row	**Stella and Stanley's row**	**Stella and Stanley make up**
The arrival of the postboy	**The arrival of the doctor and nurse**	**Stella, Stanley, Steve and Eunice's night out**

Music cards

Blue piano	**Trumpets**	**Rhumba music on the radio**
Mexican woman's song	**The Varsouviana polka**	**Drums**
The 'Wien, Wien, nur du allein' waltz on the radio	**Blanche singing in the bath ('From the land of the sky blue water')**	**Blanche singing in the bath ('Paper Moon')**

Sound cards

Mexican woman's cry	**Telephone**	**Unseen arguments**
Vendor's cry	**Locomotive**	**Doorbell**
Running water		

Symbol/motif cards

Blue piano	**Light**	**Bathing**
Alcohol	**Moths**	**The sound of a streetcar [tram]**
Letters	**Poker (card games)**	**Sight/blindness**
The colour red	**Blanche's trunk**	**Telephone**
Silk clothing	**Children/babies**	**Furs, feathers, costume jewellery**
Animals [especially apes and pigs]	**Drums, clarinet, trumpet**	**The colour white**
Belle Reve [the name of the DuBois family home]	**The music of the polka**	

Additional Reading

Books

- Adler, Thomas P. 2012. *Williams, Tennessee: A Streetcar Named Desire – Essential Criticism*
- Kazan, Elia. 2010. *Kazan on Directing* (ed Robert Cornfield, with a foreword by John Lahr)
- Kolin, Philip C. 2008. *Williams A Streetcar Named Desire – Plays in Production*
- Murphy, B. 2014. *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams (Critical Companions)*
- Murphy, B. 2006. *Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan – A Collaboration in the Theatre*
- McEvoy, Sean, with T. Coult & C. Sandford. 2009. *EMC Tragedy – a Student Handbook*
- Roudané, Matthew C. 1997. *Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*
- Weiss, K. (ed). 2014. *A Student Handbook to the Plays of Tennessee Williams*

Articles

- Kolin, Philip C.: 'The First Critical Assessments of *A Streetcar Named Desire*: The *Streetcar* Tryouts and the Reviewers' *(Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Fall 1991)
- Kramer, Richard E.: The Sculptural Drama: Williams' Plastic Theatre in *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review 5* (2002)
- Londré, Felicia Hardison: 'Poetry in the Plumbing: Stylistic Clash and Reconciliation in Recent American Stagings of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cercles* 10 (2004)
- Vlasopolos, Anca: 'Authorizing History: Victimisation in *A Streetcar Named Desire*', *Theatre Journal 38* (1986)

emagazine articles

- Bubb, S.: Presentations of Masculinity – *A Streetcar Named Desire* (e59, February 2013)
- Coult, T.: Setting of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (e37, September 2007)
- Coult, T.: Drama – Naturalism and Expressionism (e35, February 2007)
- Elliott, V.: Lights, Music, Action – Motifs and Symbols in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (e45, September 2009)
- Jacobs, R.: Blanche's Story – Exploring *A Streetcar Named Desire* on Stage and Film (e14, December 2009)
- Kinder, D.: The Language of Stanley and Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (e50, December 2010)
- Reigh, G.: Old South versus New America – *A Streetcar Named Desire* (e69, September 2015)
- Tapp, S.: Gendered Language and Cultural Identity in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (e62, December 2013)