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## CRITICAL APPROACHES

## CHARACTERISATION

The characterisation in the *text* of a play is quite a different matter from the characterisation in a stage production. When we see a stage performance most of our work is done for us: we see the setting, what the persons in a play look like, and to a considerable extent we are made to see them as the director and the cast conceive them to be. When we read the text of a play, however, we must use our imagination and form our own idea, however nebulous, of the appearance and character of the persons in the play. Here we shall consider how we learn to imagine the action of *A Streetcar Named Desire* on the basis of a simple list of characters and the author's stage directions.

As to the stage directions: readers will have noticed at the start of Scene 1 the detailed description of the stage set, which combines practical details of the appearance of the houses with skilful poetic evocations of the atmosphere: '*the warm breath of the brown river*', the '*peculiarly tender blue*' of the sky. Equally evocative are, for instance, the stage directions at the start of Scene 3.

The descriptions of the main characters in the stage directions make for interesting reading. On her first appearance Blanche is described in some detail, and we are made aware of the unsuitability of her outfit for the rundown street where her sister lives. Later on (Scene 9) we may recall the playwright's ominous words in the stage directions that she '*must avoid a strong light*' (p. 5) which will show her true age. She is compared to a moth, a comparison that stresses her vulnerability.

The description of Stanley later in this scene concentrates on his sexual power, his readiness to enjoy the good things of life, his self-confidence. Of his physical appearance we learn nothing apart from his height and his compact build. Nothing much is said about Stella, '*a gentle young woman*' (p. 4), about twenty-five years old, of a different background from her husband.



## QUESTION

Blanche is described in the stage directions in terms of her appearance, while the description of Stanley emphasises his character. Can you think of a reason for this?

## Critical approaches

The last of the foursome of main actors, Mitch remains a shadowy figure, except for his brief description of himself in Scene 6, which betrays his dullness but tells us little else.

The brevity of these descriptions offers freedom to the director and cast to create the characters from the scraps of information given by the dramatist.

What of the readers? They too are given the freedom to endow the main characters with faces and figures, peculiarities of gesture and walk, though inevitably these will be shadowy figures, lacking the definition of real actors on the stage.

Throughout the play Williams emphasises the way in which people's natures cause them to act in a particular way. The inevitability of fate – the streetcar that carries them – is brought about by the characters being what they are, acting as they do because their natures compel them. To say this is to stress the importance of character in the play. The dramatist's skill lies in taking the human qualities necessary for the enactment of the tragedy, and building from them, through speech and action, believable human beings.

## BLANCHE

To begin with, the characters appearing in Scene 1 are dismissed with only brief description (if any) of their appearance. When Blanche appears, however, she is described in more detail – not only her clothes, but also the impression she gives of delicacy and vulnerability.

As we read on, her appearance becomes ever clearer and so does her character. Her appearance – slim figure, a face of delicate, fading beauty – is described in the stage directions, and the readers also gather further information about her from the other characters' comments. (Indeed she demands flattering comments from her sister, from the reluctant Stanley and from Eunice.)

Her complex, contradictory character also becomes clear. Very early in the play we become aware of her class snobbery (in her dismissal

## CONTEXT

Williams stresses the role of character in a person's actions: the streetcar – or fate – that carries them is their own making.

World events		Arts	Tennessee Williams
	<b>1939</b>	<p>Film version of Margaret Mitchell's <i>Gone with the Wind</i>, starring Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh</p> <p>Film <i>The Wizard of Oz</i>, starring Judy Garland</p> <p>Publication of the novel <i>The Grapes of Wrath</i> by John Steinbeck</p>	<p><i>American Blues</i>, a collection of three short plays by Tennessee Williams wins a prize at the Group Theatre Play Contest</p>
	<b>1940</b>	<p><i>The Long Mirror</i> by J. B. Priestley is staged</p> <p>Charlie Chaplin directs and stars in the film <i>The Great Dictator</i></p> <p>Publication of the novel <i>For Whom the Bell Tolls</i> by Ernest Hemingway</p>	<p>The play <i>Battle of Angels</i> is not a success</p>
	<b>1941</b>	<p>Orson Welles directs and stars in the film <i>Citizen Kane</i></p> <p>Noel Coward's play <i>Blithe Spirit</i> is staged</p> <p>The play <i>Long Day's Journey into Night</i> by Eugene O'Neill is written</p>	
<p>Outbreak of Second World War in Europe</p>			
<p>Battle of Britain</p>			
<p>USA joins the Allies against the Axis powers in the Second World War</p>			

World events		Arts	Tennessee Williams
	<b>1942</b>	<p>Edward Hopper paints <i>Nighthawks</i></p> <p>Publication of the novel <i>L'Étranger</i> by Albert Camus</p>	
	<b>1943</b>	<p>The Rodgers and Hammerstein musical <i>Oklahoma</i> is staged</p> <p>Jean-Paul Sartre's essay <i>Being and Nothingness</i> is published</p>	<p>Obtains a contract as a scriptwriter for MGM</p>
	<b>1944</b>	<p>Laurence Olivier directs and stars in the film <i>Henry V</i></p> <p>Bartok's Violin Concerto</p> <p>Jean-Paul Sartre's play <i>Huis Clos</i> is staged</p>	<p>The play <i>The Glass Menagerie</i> is staged in Chicago</p>
	<b>1945</b>	<p>George Orwell's novel <i>Animal Farm</i> is published</p>	<p>Starts work on the play <i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i></p>
<p>US naval-air victory at Midway Island ends Japanese expansion in the Pacific</p>			
<p>British and American troops land at Salerno</p>			
<p>D-Day allied landings in Normandy</p>			
<p>US President Franklin D. Roosevelt dies. He is succeeded by Harry S. Truman</p>			
<p>American aircraft drops atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki</p>			
<p>End of Second World War</p>			