

CONTENTS

PART ONE: INTRODUCING A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

How to study <i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i>	5
<i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i> : A snapshot	6

PART TWO: STUDYING A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

Synopsis	8
Scene One.....	10
Extract analysis: Scene One, pp. 11–12	12
Scene Two.....	14
Scene Three.....	17
Scene Four.....	19
Scene Five.....	21
Scene Six.....	23
Scene Seven.....	26
Scene Eight.....	27
Scene Nine.....	29
Extract analysis: Scene Nine, pp. 86–7	31
Scene Ten.....	33
Scene Eleven.....	35
Extract analysis: Scene Eleven, pp. 101–2	37
Progress check	39

PART THREE: CHARACTERS AND THEMES

Characters.....	41
Blanche	42
Stanley	45
Stella.....	47
Mitch.....	49
Minor characters	51
Themes	52
Desire and fate.....	52
Death.....	54
Madness	55
Social class.....	56
Progress check	57

PART FOUR: GENRE, STRUCTURE AND LANGUAGE

Genre.....	58
Structure	60
Language	63
Imagery and symbolism	64
Visual and sound effects.....	66
Progress check	67

PART FIVE: CONTEXTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

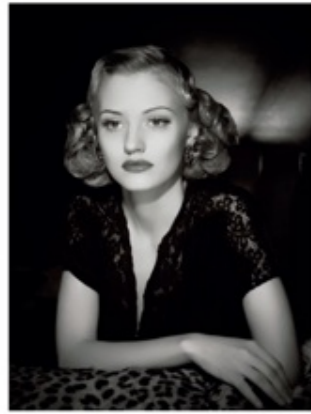
Contexts	68
Historical context	68
Setting.....	71
Literary context.....	72
Critical interpretations	74
Early reception.....	74
Later revivals.....	76
Contemporary approaches	78
Progress check	80

PART SIX: PROGRESS BOOSTER

Assessment focus.....	81
How to write high-quality responses	83
Responding to a general question about the whole text	85
Responding to a statement, viewpoint or quotation	87
Responding to comparison or linked text question	89
Writing about contexts	91
Using critical interpretations and perspectives	92
Annotated sample answers.....	94
Candidate 1	94
Candidate 2.....	96
Candidate 3.....	98
Practice task.....	100

PART SEVEN: FURTHER STUDY AND ANSWERS

Further reading.....	101
Literary terms	102
Revision task answers.....	104
Progress check answers.....	106
Mark scheme	111



KEY CONTEXT

Williams stresses the role of character in a person's actions: the streetcar – or fate – that carries them is of their own making. In traditional tragedy, the hero or heroine's downfall is brought about by fate, a character flaw, or both.

Blanche

Who is Blanche?

- Blanche DuBois is Stella's older sister, who has come to New Orleans supposedly to visit, but it is actually because she has no money, no job and nowhere else to go.
- She is a former high-school English teacher who lost her job because of a relationship with one of her students.
- She is the play's tragic heroine, whose weaknesses, coupled with the failure of others to understand her, lead to her breakdown and committal to an institution.

Blanche's appearance

To begin with, the characters appearing in Scene One are dismissed with only brief descriptions (if any) of their appearance. When Blanche appears, however, Williams describes her in more detail – not only her clothes, but also the impression she gives of moth-like 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.

Blanche's faults

Blanche's complex, contradictory character also emerges. Very early in the play we become aware of her snobbery (in her dismissal of the black neighbour's kindness and of Eunice's company) and we shall be reminded of it again in the last scene when she rudely dismisses Eunice's gift of grapes with her obsessional concern about cleanliness – they may not have been washed. She even goes off into a flight of fancy about dying 'of eating an unwashed grape' (Scene Eleven, p. 102).

We also learn that Blanche is a heavy drinker. The reasons for her craving for alcohol are implied, as we learn about her guilt about her husband's suicide and about her promiscuity. Alcohol offers temporary reassurance and dulls emotional pain. Equally, her passion for taking long baths could be taken as a symbol of her yearning to wash away her guilt. Of course, it has a dramatic function as well, her long absences in the bathroom enabling the other characters to speak of matters that are not for her ears.

Contradictions

Stanley gives us the full details of Blanche's past later on, but her seductive manner – which he notes with astonishment in Scene Two and again in Scene Three – is perhaps an early warning. As she so primly insists on her respectability to Mitch in Scene Six, readers will inevitably recall her flirting with Stanley earlier, as well as the episode with the young man in Scene Five. Her actions reveal her character, leaving the readers to draw their own conclusions.

Readers – and theatre audiences – will be struck by the inconsistencies in Blanche's behaviour: her cultural pretensions are designed to impress people with her superiority, and contrast with her genuine love of poetry. She is wilfully ignorant of the causes of the loss of Belle Reve, yet she understands that the root cause was her family's extravagant spending on possibly immoral self-indulgences. These inconsistencies help to make her character less predictable and more fully human.

Progress booster: Thoughts and feelings

A02

Make sure you can write about how Williams constantly gives us clues to characters' inner thoughts and feelings. In her conversation with her sister in Scene Four, Blanche admits indirectly that she knows about sexual desire – 'when the devil is in you' (Scene Four, p. 46) – but it seems that she has never experienced true passion in which love and sexual desire play equal parts. Her incomprehension of real passion is total and will play a part in alienating her sister. The full strength of Stella's love for her husband is shown in the last scene, when she will have her sister committed to a mental hospital, rather than believe the truth about the rape. Passion like this is beyond Blanche's imagining, and it may be that she is too self-absorbed ever to surrender to it. This also explains her inability to understand the effects of her behaviour. After the row with Stanley in Scene Two, Blanche reassures her sister that she 'handled it nicely' (Scene Two, p. 25), yet this is the very point at which Stanley begins to be suspicious about his sister-in-law's past history.

Blanche's weaknesses

Blanche may hide her alcoholism behind euphemisms but she does recognise some of her weaknesses – 'I've got to be good and keep my hands off children' (Scene Five, p. 57). The weakness that she never does admit, and may not be aware of, is her recklessness, which makes her risk her chance of security – in the episode with the young man in Scene Five and, again, when entertaining Mitch in Scene Six.

Significantly she never speaks of this except when telling herself to be good: her actions on the stage alone speak here. Perhaps this is because she herself is uncertain about her motives for such behaviour. It is not even clear that she regrets her affair with one of her students, beyond the fact that she lost her teaching job because of it. We can only speculate, and it is arguable that the uncertainty about some aspects of Blanche's character contributes to making her a believable human being.

The centre of attention

Though far from being a classical tragic heroine, Blanche still commands our attention. After arriving in Elysian Fields she is hardly ever offstage; even offstage, she is heard singing in the bath. In Scene Seven she happily sings sentimental popular songs in contrapuntal contrast to the damning information about her promiscuity that Stanley is giving to Stella in the kitchen. The same technique is used in the last scene, where Blanche's fussy instructions about her outfit provide an ironic background to her sister's conversation with Eunice about the arrangements for Blanche's committal to a mental hospital.

If you glance through the play, you will find that every scene (except Scene Four) ends with Blanche centre stage, commanding our attention with an arresting phrase or a dramatic gesture. In the last scene particularly, this pathetic, deluded woman assumes the dignity she

A03 KEY CONTEXT

The young man Blanche flirts with is collecting for the *Evening Star* newspaper. This is an appropriate name. The 'evening star' is Venus, named after the mythical goddess of love.

A03 KEY CONTEXT

Williams himself apparently came to see Blanche as a real woman who went on living outside his play. He remarked that Blanche was a survivor and that he was sure that she would recover and leave the asylum and marry a 'Gentleman Caller' (Tennessee Williams's title of a film script, later his play *The Glass Menagerie*). His own sister never recovered from mental illness. Do you think it is usual for an author to see a character in their work as a real person?

USING CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

What is a critical interpretation?

The particular way a text is viewed or understood can be called an interpretation, and can be made by literary critics (specialists in studying literary texts), reviewers or everyday readers and students. Looking at the text from a critical perspective does not necessarily mean finding what is wrong with it or what you object to, but is more about taking a position on particular elements of the text, or on what others say about it. For example:

1. Notions of 'character'

- Is the character an 'archetype' (a specific type of character with common features)? (For example, Stanley could be seen as an archetypal villain in melodrama, and Blanche as an archetypal victim.)
- Does the character personify, symbolise or represent a specific idea or **trope** (the noble heroine brought down by a fatal flaw; how power preys on weakness)?
- Is the character modern, universal, of his/her time, historically accurate, etc.? (For example, is Stanley the embodiment of Darwinian ideas of natural selection or, like many modern villains, driven by selfish, petty motives?)

2. Ideas and issues

What the play tells us about particular ideas or issues and how we interpret these.

For example:

- Ideas about natural selection, e.g. the belief that society benefits if people like Stanley are allowed to compete without restraint
- The role of men/women in society and within marriage
- What **tragedy** means to 1940s and modern audiences
- Moral and social attitudes towards sexuality

3. Links and contexts

How the play links with, follows or pre-echoes other texts, ideas. For example:

- Its influence culturally, historically and socially. Do we see echoes of the characters or genres in other texts? How similar to other heroines is Blanche and why? Does her characterisation share features with the plays of Ibsen and Strindberg, or David Mamet, for example?
- How its language links to other texts or modes, such as religious works, myth, legend, etc.

KEY INTERPRETATION

A05

Guardian theatre critic Michael Billington said of Ben Foster's performance: 'There is something dangerous about this sweaty, tattooed, close-cropped Stanley who has recently been discharged from the military and who has not lost his combative instinct. At the same time, you understand his refusal to be patronised and insulted by his affected sister-in-law.'

4. Genre and dramatic structure

How the play is constructed and how Williams makes his narrative.

- Does it follow a particular dramatic convention?
- What is the function of specific events, characters, theatrical devices, staging, etc., in relation to narrative?
- What are the specific moments of tension, conflict, crisis and **denouement** – and do we agree on what they are?

5. Audience and critical reaction

How the play works on an audience or reader, and whether this changes over time and in different contexts. Also, how different types of reader have responded, from reviewers, to actors and directors, to academics and researchers. For example:

- How far do readers or audiences empathise with, feel distance from, judge and/or evaluate the events and characters?
- What ideas do they find compelling and convincing, or lacking in truth and impact?
- How far do they see the play as unique and modern, part of a tradition or carrying echoes of other works and ideas?

Writing about critical perspectives

The important thing to remember is that **you** are a critic too. Your job is to evaluate what a critic or school of criticism has said about the elements above, arrive at your own conclusions, and also express your own ideas.

In essence, you need to: **consider** the views of others, **synthesise** them, then decide on **your perspective**. For example:

Explain the viewpoints

Critical view A about Stanley and Blanche:

Elia Kazan comments, 'Blanche is dangerous. She is destructive.' Under his direction, Blanche was an unstable woman who had entered and threatened the security of a different world, and who was finally cast out, allowing that world to survive.

Critical view B about the same aspect:

As interpreted by Harold Clurman, Blanche is a delicate and sensitive woman pushed into insanity by a brutish environment presided over by chief ape-man Stanley Kowalski.

Then synthesise and add your perspective

Blanche is certainly unbalanced from the start of the play, as she admits to Stella when she says she is 'not very well' and cannot 'be alone'. The danger she represents, as interpreted by Elia Kazan's interpretation of her character, is made apparent in her 'I took the blows' speech, in which she goes on the attack to pre-empt any criticism from Stella. Even more, she makes a serious attempt to persuade Stella to leave the father of her unborn baby because he is 'sub-human'. On the other hand, Blanche's undoubted sensitivity is seen in her exchanges with Mitch, and especially in her sympathy for his impending bereavement. She is a dangerously disruptive force, but she still deserves our compassion as a woman traumatised by the suicide of her husband and victimised by male-dominated society.

A05 KEY INTERPRETATION

In *The Guardian* theatre critic Susannah Clapp said: 'Ben Foster's Stanley is a terrific tattooed bruiser who roars like a goaded bull. He is, as he should be, both bullying – 'I'm king around here' – and magnetic.'