# Contents

## Part One
**Introduction**
- How to study a play ................................................. 5
- Reading *A Streetcar Named Desire* ............................. 6

## Part Two
**The text**
- Note on the text .................................................. 11
- Synopsis ............................................................ 13
- Scene 1 .................................................................. 16
- Scene 2 .................................................................. 19
- Scene 3 .................................................................. 21
- Scene 4 .................................................................. 24
- Scene 5 .................................................................. 26
- Scene 6 .................................................................. 28
- Scene 7 .................................................................. 30
- Scene 8 .................................................................. 31
- Scene 9 .................................................................. 33
- Scene 10 ................................................................. 35
- Scene 11 ................................................................. 37
- Extended commentaries .......................................... 40
  - Text 1 (Scene 1, pages 12–13) .............................. 40
  - Text 2 (Scene 9, page 72) ..................................... 45
  - Text 3 (Scene 11, pages 84–5) ............................. 48

## Part Three
**Critical approaches**
- Characterisation .................................................... 52
- Blanche ................................................................. 53
- Stanley ................................................................. 55
- Stella ................................................................. 57
- Mitch ................................................................. 58
- Themes ............................................................... 59
- Desire and fate ..................................................... 59
- Death ................................................................. 61
- Madness ............................................................. 62

## Part Four
**Critical history**
- Early reception ...................................................... 80
- Later revivals ....................................................... 84

## Part Five
**Background**
- Tennessee Williams ............................................... 87
- Other works ........................................................ 90
- Historical background .......................................... 92
- Literary background ............................................ 95
- Chronology ........................................................ 98

## Further Reading ....................................................... 102

## Literary Terms ....................................................... 104

## Author of these notes ........................................... 106

Dramatic techniques ......................................................... 64
- The unities ............................................................ 64
- Structure ............................................................. 65
- Handling of time .................................................... 67
- Visual and sound effects ......................................... 69
- Focus ................................................................. 70
- Language and style ................................................ 72
- Imagery and symbolism ......................................... 73
- Morality play or melodrama? ................................. 77
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
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>World events</th>
<th>1939</th>
<th>Arts</th>
<th>Tennessee Williams</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outbreak of Second World War in Europe</td>
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<td>Film version of Margaret Mitchell’s <em>Gone with the Wind</em>, starring Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh</td>
<td><em>American Blues</em>, a collection of three short plays by Tennessee Williams wins a prize at the Group Theatre Play Contest</td>
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<td>Film <em>The Wizard of Oz</em>, starring Judy Garland</td>
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<td>Publication of the novel <em>The Grapes of Wrath</em> by John Steinbeck</td>
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<td>Battle of Britain</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td><em>The Long Mirror</em> by J. B. Priestley is staged</td>
<td><em>The play</em> <em>Battle of Angels</em> is not a success</td>
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<td>Charlie Chaplin directs and stars in the film <em>The Great Dictator</em></td>
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<td>Publication of the novel <em>For Whom the Bell Tolls</em> by Ernest Hemingway</td>
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<td>USA joins the Allies against the Axis powers in the Second World War</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Orson Welles directs and stars in the film <em>Citizen Kane</em></td>
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<td>Noel Coward’s play <em>Blithe Spirit</em> is staged</td>
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<td>The play <em>Long Day’s Journey into Night</em> by Eugene O’Neill is written</td>
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<tr>
<th>World events</th>
<th>1942</th>
<th>Arts</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>Edward Hopper paints <em>Nighthawks</em></td>
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<td>Publication of the novel <em>L’Etranger</em> by Albert Camus</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>British and American troops land at Salerno</td>
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<td>1943</td>
<td>The Rodgers and Hammerstein musical <em>Oklahoma</em> is staged</td>
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<td>Jean-Paul Sartre’s essay <em>Being and Nothingness</em> is published</td>
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<td>D-Day allied landings in Normandy</td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>Laurence Olivier directs and stars in the film <em>Henry V</em></td>
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<td>The play <em>The Glass Menagerie</em> is staged in Chicago</td>
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<td>Bartók’s Violin Concerto</td>
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<td>Jean-Paul Sartre’s play <em>Huis Clos</em> is staged</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>US President Franklin D. Roosevelt dies. He is succeeded by Harry S. Truman</td>
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<td>The play <em>An Inspector Calls</em> by J. B. Priestley is staged</td>
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<td>George Orwell’s novel <em>Animal Farm</em> is published</td>
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<td>Starts work on the play <em>A Streetcar Named Desire</em></td>
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