



Unit AS 1: Section B

The Study of Drama 1900-Present

Williams: A Streetcar Named Desire

In this Unit there are 4 Assessment Objectives involved – A01, A02, A03 and A05.

A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

In this examination, the candidate should be able to articulate informed and relevant responses that communicate effectively knowledge and understanding of a selected play.

This AO involves the student's knowledge and understanding of the play, and ability to express relevant ideas accurately and coherently, using appropriate terminology and concepts. Quality of written communication is taken into consideration in all units.

Synopsis of the play

Scenes 1-2

Blanche DuBois, a dainty but pretentious woman carrying a suitcase, arrives in the French Quarter of New Orleans in search of her sister Stella's apartment. She is shocked by the shabby rundown area and the poor state of her sister's home. The sisters greet each other affectionately but tensions rise when Blanche informs Stella that their family home Belle Reve has been 'lost' and accuses Stella of abandoning her. The dialogue reveals background information about Blanche: she was an English teacher and was previously married but her husband is now dead.

Stanley is Stella's factory-working husband of Polish decent. He is distrustful of Blanche and suspects she has cheated Stella when he learns about the sale of Belle Reve. He ruffles through Blanche's belongings looking for evidence, but only discovers cheap trinkets and fake jewels. Stanley refuses to fall for Blanche's airs and graces when she attempts to distract him by flirting with him. He claims he will have a lawyer analyse the papers and reveals that Stella is pregnant.

Scenes 3 - 4

When the sisters return from their night-out later that evening, Stanley's poker game



is still underway. Stanley becomes aggressive, irritated that Mitch is paying attention to Blanche. The row ends in violence with Stanley striking Stella, and she and Blanche leave to stay in their neighbour's apartment. Blanche is horrified and tries to convince Stella to leave, arguing that Stella needs to face the fact that she is married to a madman. However, Stella refuses, explaining the passionate love she shares with Stanley.

Scenes 5 – 6

Time passes and Blanche is still living in the apartment. She tells Stella that she fears old age and has pinned her hopes on Mitch. While the hostilities between Blanche and Stanley continue, the relationship between Mitch and Blanche develops. We learn more about Blanche's past: she reveals to Mitch that she had a homosexual husband who committed suicide. Mitch, who is polite, quiet and lives with his sick mother, seems an ideal partner for Blanche, and suggests that the two of them could find happiness together.

Scenes 7 - 8

Stanley destroys the potential union by revealing Blanche's sordid past: when Stella is preparing a birthday party for Blanche he tells Stella about her sister's promiscuous behaviour. Blanche is distraught when she finds out that Stanley has already told Mitch, thus ending all possibility of marriage. He has bought Blanche a gift – a bus ticket back to Laurel. Stella is angry with her husband's obvious cruelty towards Blanche and a dispute is about to erupt but ends with Stella going into labour.

Scene 9

Later that evening Mitch arrives to confront Blanche about her lies. It is clear that Blanche has disintegrated: she has been drinking heavily and is very disturbed. She asks for Mitch's understanding and tries to explain. Physically exposed under the naked light of the apartment and Mitch's accusations of lying, she admits to her liaisons with many strangers, soldiers, and acknowledges that she was declared morally unfit for teaching because of an affair with a seventeen-year-old student. Mitch declares that he does not want to marry her and tries to rape her but her cries of 'FIRE' scare him off.

Scene 10

Blanche is alone in the apartment when Stanley returns from the hospital to await the arrival of the baby. She has continued drinking and descended even further into her fantasies, dressing up in an evening gown and tiara and talking to imaginary guests. When Stanley questions her about her attire she says she received a telegram inviting her on a cruise. Initially Stanley is amiable but mocks her illusions when she calls him 'swine', accusing her of 'lies and conceit and tricks'. Blanche becomes frightened and Stanley enjoys taunting her. She tries to fight him off with a broken bottle but Stanley easily grabs her wrist and carries her off.

Scene 11

Weeks later, a quiet poker game is played at the apartment as Stella packs her sister's belongings. She tells her neighbour that she couldn't believe Blanche's story about being raped by Stanley. She explains that Blanche believes she is going on a cruise but the reality is that Stella has agreed to commit her to a mental hospital. A doctor and a nurse arrive to escort Blanche out of the apartment. Blanche is hesitant and becomes hysterical when Stanley rips down the paper lantern. They are able to subdue her, treating her with care and compassion. She is led off as Stella sobs and Stanley tries, successfully, to comfort her.



Main Characters

A Streetcar Named Desire is a play driven by characterisation and Williams uses a range of techniques to establish character including dialogue, costume, stage directions, juxtaposition, imagery and symbolism, all of which are discussed in the A02 Dramatic Methods section of this chapter.

Blanche DuBois

Blanche is the play's protagonist whose arrival at her sister's apartment causes the tragic events that unfold. Blanche's situation is desperate: her homosexual husband committed suicide and she is homeless and jobless, having lost both her family's ancestral home and her teaching position in Laurel. Blanche is vulnerable and insecure, carrying with her the guilt of her husband's death and hiding her sexually amoral background.

Despite her dubious background, Blanche attempts to retain the appearance of decency and propriety by impressing others with her Southern aristocratic upbringing, social snobbery and refined ideals. Just as the Old South has rapidly declined from its former glory in the plantations of the 19th century, so too has Blanche's status. Her wealth has gone and her beauty has faded with age. She masks its loss with soft lighting and showy but trashy finery. She is openly flirtatious with other male characters, using her charms to seduce in order to preserve her disintegrating self-image. Blanche's avoidance of reality and inability to adapt and cope with the harshness of the new modern world ultimately lead to her downfall.

Blanche is a complex character with many contradictions: she maintains an air of virtuous Southern respectability yet is sexually suggestive, at times predatory, and hides her promiscuous past. She is a delicate and fragile character, yet is arrogant and insensitive towards others. She criticises her ancestors for their flaws yet repeats the same mistakes herself. She is unwilling to face up to reality yet shows an acute awareness of her weaknesses at times and accuses Stella of not facing up to the truth when Stanley is violent. Essentially Blanche's pretensions are an attempt to hide the truth. Her constant baths serve as a symbol of her attempt to wash away her feelings of guilt; her heavy drinking allows her to escape present reality, and her attraction to young men is an attempt to recapture her youth. Stanley's demolition of Blanche's façade totally shatters her self-image. He destroys the remainder of her sexual and mental identity by raping her and committing her to an asylum. Thus Blanche becomes a victim of the emerging new world.

Stanley Kowalski

Masculine, brutish and dominant, Stanley is the opposite of Blanche's delicate Southern femininity. Stanley represents the common hero, the new modern heterogeneous America and emphasises his status as "one hundred percent American" in response to Blanche's racist 'Polack' comments. While the factory worker is not educated, he is intelligent and shrewd in his understanding of others as is demonstrated by his refusal to fall for Blanche's manipulations. He is blunt, direct and has a strong contempt for class snobbery. This becomes clear to the audience in the way he destroys Blanche's pretensions and when he describes to Stella how he pulled



her 'down off them columns'. He is a strong presence on the stage and demonstrates his superiority over other men and women through his sexual magnetism and use of physical violence. While we might sympathise with Stanley at the beginning of the play, his bullying behaviour and lack of remorse for domestic abuse and raping Blanche are difficult for the audience to accept.

Stella

Stella Kowalski is Blanche's younger sister. She is 25 years old, pregnant and seems happy with her marriage to Stanley and content to live in the modest apartment. In contrast to her sister, she is a pragmatic character who recognises there is no future at Belle Reve and leaves her Old South upbringing in favour of the working-class Stanley and life in New Orleans. Much of her attraction to Stanley is physical, as is evident when she tries to explain the sexual passion that holds them together to Blanche, who fails to understand.

Stella is caught in the clash between the two worlds represented by Blanche and Stanley as both try to win her over. While she is pragmatic and survives because she is more flexible than Blanche, there is much to suggest that she embodies much of her older sister's weaknesses. Firstly she is not a strong character and remains soft and gentle, passive and silent at key moments in the play. She is willing for example, to play along with Blanche's charades, serving her cokes and attending her while she baths, and often justifying or denying her sister's behaviour to Stanley. Notably her willingness to ignore Stanley's violent outbursts and eventually refusing to accept that her husband raped Blanche because she could not 'believe her story and go on living with Stanley' indicate that, like Blanche, she is delusional. Her avoidance of reality is a means of self-preservation.

Mitch

Mitch is Stanley's work colleague and poker-playing friend, who has a romantic interest in Blanche. When we first see Mitch, he is described in similar terms to Stanley ('about twenty-eight or thirty years old, roughly dressed in blue denim work clothes') suggesting his working-class status. He is strong physically, telling Blanche that he works out to keep fit and invites her to admire his stomach muscles. 'It is so hard that now a man can punch me in the belly and it don't hurt me. Punch me! Go on!' While Mitch's comments here emphasise his masculine qualities and suggests he is a 'hard' character in opposition to the soft feminine qualities displayed by Blanche and Stella, he is gentle and sensitive towards others. The other men tease him about his devotion to his mother, but his kindness towards the sick woman indicates he is different to the other males. Although he is straightforward, and perhaps naïve, Mitch is a contrast to the brutality displayed by other men such as Stanley and Steve.

Mitch represents for Blanche a means of achieving economic stability and a refuge from the harsh modern world to which she finds herself exposed. Blanche uses her feminine charms to allure him. While Mitch is awkward and clumsy, 'Blanche waltzes to the music with romantic gestures. Mitch is delighted and moves in awkward imitation like a dancing bear'. The simile indicates his clumsiness. However he is aware of his crudeness, as shown in the sensitivity he expresses when he acknowledges that Blanche sees them as 'being a pretty rough bunch.' Blanche sees Mitch as a potential saviour; however as the play progresses it becomes more and



more clear that this is impossible as Blanche's facade as a virtuous and innocent woman disappears with her attempted seduction of the young delivery boy and Stanley's exposure of her sexual past. The revelation of the extent of Blanche's deceptions makes Mitch feel he has been made a fool of and ultimately drives him away.

Themes

Death and Desire

Williams' exploration of the destructive power of sex and desire is the central theme of the play, as is symbolised by the streetcars 'Desire' and 'Cemeteries' which bring Blanche to Elysian Fields. The streetcars (trams) are a metaphor for human nature and represent Blanche's downward trajectory to destruction as a result of unrestrained sexual desire. Blanche's sense of self-worth is reliant on her sexual attraction, as she desperately tries to recapture her lost youth. However, like her ancestors with their 'epic fornications', she is reckless and her attempted seduction of the young delivery boy shows that her relationship with Mitch is destined to fail. Blanche fears ageing and mortality, and references to death which foreshadow her final descent into madness permeate the language of the play. The correlation between sex and violence is evident in other characters in the play, for example Blanche's husband's homosexuality and suicide, and Stanley's sexual and violent nature.

Romance and Realism

Williams' concern with the 'plight of the romantic in an unromantic world' (Bigsby, *Confrontation and Commitment, A Study of Contemporary American Drama 1959-66*, p.20) is dramatised in Blanche's struggle to cope with the cruel reality of life. She is already a desperate character at the beginning of the play, without material security, ostracised from Laurel and haunted by memories of her dead husband. She constructs an elaborate illusory world full of lies and deceit as a means of self-preservation and protection, further withdrawing into her private world of illusion as the play progresses. Williams emphasises Blanche's evasions through various symbols: the Chinese paper lantern which she places over the naked light bulb for example provides a soft romantic light that hides her fading beauty and softens the stark grimness of the Kowalski's apartment. Mitch's and Stanley's ripping down the paper lantern reflects the stripping away of Blanche's pretences. In the confrontation between Blanche and Mitch, Blanche cries that she does not want realism but magic: "I don't tell the truth. I tell what ought to be truth." While fantasy is a useful method of shielding herself, it is only a temporary measure and Blanche is unable to see how it will lead to her ruin rather than her rescue. The clash between romance and realism is also dramatised through the stage design (see the Staging section for more details).

Old South versus New America

In *Conversations with Tennessee Williams* the playwright discusses his concern with the "Old South's romantic attitude towards life" which is in contention with the "merciless harshness of America's success-orientated society". These two opposing



ideals are represented in the clash between Blanche and Stanley. Blanche is a relic from an old world, personifying the faded grandeur of the pre-Civil war era with her notions of social hierarchy and pretensions to gentility. Stanley is associated with the new America which is epitomised by the New Orleans setting which signifies the lively, brash multi-cultural landscape of post-war America. From the outset Blanche and her ideals are incongruous with the fast-paced city, and her attempts to cling to the past lead to an epic battle between old and modern values.

However, it is important to acknowledge that Williams does not glorify either the past or the present. While we may sympathise with Blanche's plight, Williams emphasises the hypocrisy of Southern romantic ideals, and the demise of the aristocratic lifestyle of the South is indicated in the images of death in the play. Equally, although Williams' portrays the vibrancy and vitality of new America, it is shown to be a cruel, vulgar and brutish world where only the ruthless survive. Ultimately the cultural traditions of the South cannot survive in post-war America.



A02: Dramatic methods

In this examination, the candidate should analyse the playwright's use of such dramatic methods as characterization, structure, language and staging.

The student should analyse relevantly the ways in which meanings are shaped in drama. This means identifying dramatic methods and showing how these methods relate to the key terms of the question.

Discussing dramatic methods - advice to teachers and students:

As this unit is closed book, examiners will be realistic about the amount of detail which can be provided. It is anticipated that the larger-scale features of characterization, structure, language and staging will be most useful in constructing a relevant response in the time available.

Staging and Set design

In his staging of *A Street Car Named Desire*, Williams is innovative in his unconventional blending of realistic elements with an expressionistic style. Expressionism is a style of drama which offers a symbolic or abstract representation of reality (see Glossary). Williams commented on his use of theatrical devices in *The Glass Menagerie*, "When a play employs unconventional techniques it should not be trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality...but should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are..." Williams used a range of theatrical devices such as stage symbols and scenic images that differentiated him from the realist dramatists of the previous century.

Indeed Williams' approach in *Streetcar* is evident in the explicit details regarding the stage set. The action takes place in 1947, in a confined two-bedroom apartment in an economically deprived area of New Orleans. The stage directions describe the exterior surroundings as 'poor' and 'raffish' with white frame houses that are 'weathered grey with rickety outside stairs and galleries', and the references to L&N tracks and warehouses clearly establish the location as an urban industrial working-class area. Such details as 'the music of Negro entertainers at a bar-room around the corner', the overlapping voices of people on the street, the quick exchange between the Negro woman and the sailor, and the background calls of the vendor serve to establish the multicultural vibrancy of the city.

While the setting appears realistic, it is also expressionistic in the juxtaposition of the exterior and the interior. The stage directions specify the use of lighting specific areas of the stage: "The surrounding areas dim out as the interior is lighted. Two rooms can be seen, not too clearly defined... The outer wall of the building disappears and the interiors of the two rooms can be dimly seen." Throughout the play the movement between the streets and the apartment is fluid, with the transparent walls allowing for seamless movement between the exterior of the New Orleans street and the inner world of the Kowalski apartment, emphasising the way the public world encroaches on the private. At times both the apartment and the street can be seen at once. The exploration of the boundary between exterior and interior dramatises the theme of fantasy and illusion, maintaining a façade to mask an inner reality. The most notable use of this effect occurs just before Stanley rapes Blanche, when the back wall



becomes transparent to show the altercation between the prostitute and the drunkard in the street, thus highlighting the brutality of life in New Orleans. The domestic/interior is no protection from the harsh reality of life.

Costumes and Appearance

The costume and appearance of the characters is important for the audience in gaining a first impression of the characters.

Blanche's clothes emphasise her vulnerability. On her arrival to Elysian Fields, Blanche is described as 'daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl.' The use of colour symbolism is noteworthy as 'Blanche' means white and this, combined with the white suit and white jewellery, emphasises the character's pretensions of purity and innocence. The details suggest her femininity and notions of class grandeur, and the 'fluffy' bodice implies the soft delicacy associated with Blanche, who later emphasises this in her comments that she was never 'hard or self-sufficient' but soft and vulnerable. Indeed her apparel immediately establishes her to be out of place in the hard, fast-paced city life she is encountering. Interestingly Stella is also described in the same terms with her 'white lace collar' and Blanche suggests that she ought to have her hair cut in 'a feather bob' to enhance her 'dainty features'.

Blanche's pretensions and false aspirations are also signified in her clothing with the fake furs and costume jewellery. Her descent into her illusory world in the penultimate scene is established immediately with her costume - a 'somewhat soiled and crumpled white satin evening gown and a pair of scuffed silver slippers...placing the rhinestone tiara on her head'. Again the 'white' suggests purity as she tries to create the illusion of the innocent perfect Southern belle in order to attract men, but the 'soiled', 'crumpled' and 'scuffed' state of her clothing indicates that the character is tarnished. In reality she is a social pariah, ostracised because of her indiscreet sexual behaviour. However her clothing also helps the audience to empathise with her, as the costume makes visual her mental decline as she sinks further into her illusory world as an escape from present hardship.

Stanley's costume is also part of his characterization. He is of medium height, strongly built and wearing blue denim work-clothes, the details here reflecting the character's straightforward, down-to-earth attitude and working-class status. Frequently Blanche compares Stanley to a prehistoric caveman, which is represented with Stanley's green and scarlet bowling shirt. The bold jarring colours denote his primitive nature and his blunt, honest approach to life. Where Stella and Blanche are presented in soft, subtle colours, Stanley and the other men are portrayed in bold primal colours that emphasise their masculinity. The bowling shirt exemplifies Stanley's love of physical activity, and when he changes his sweaty shirt he demonstrates to the audience that he is the 'unrefined type', a dominant male at the peak of his manhood.

Lighting

Williams' creative use of lighting in *Streetcar* is a trademark of his drama and goes beyond merely illuminating the stage. The use of lighting is non-realistic in that the lighting takes on a symbolic significance in the play. The opening descriptions state



that the play is set 'at first dark' with a 'tender blue almost a turquoise' sky which gives the scene a romantic quality that contrasts with the gritty urban setting (see also the Staging and Set design section). The lighting also can be used to suggest Blanche's mental state and the theme of fantasy. Blanche's appearance is described in terms of lighting with the references to white imagery and the stage directions stating that 'her delicate beauty must avoid a strong light'. Throughout the play Blanche avoids the glaring probing light of the naked bulb, demanding instantly that Stella shut off the over-light and instead preferring the subtle romantic hues of the paper lantern and candles – thus the apartment is dimly lit, providing softer radiance in which to view the character. The significance of this is emphasised through Blanche's comment that 'soft people have got to shimmer and glow' in order to survive.

Williams' utilization of lighting effects is evident in Scene three with the poker game. The opening stage directions compare the scene to the 'lurid nocturnal brilliance' of Van Gogh's billiard parlour, with the bold colours of the green glass shade depicting the coarseness of the men. The harshness of the kitchen light contrasts with the softness of the dimly lit bedroom area that the women occupy. Here we see Blanche's manipulation of light to highlight her sexuality as 'She takes off the blouse and stands in her pink silk brassiere and white skirt in the light through the portieres.' Despite Stella's warning she moves back into the light raising her arms, exposing her figure and gaining Mitch's attention.

Light also symbolically represents truth and exposure. In the first meeting between the sisters, Blanche acknowledges that 'daylight never exposed so total a ruin'. Stanley 'enlightens' Stella about his rights as a husband. Later Blanche speaks of the 'blinding light' of the discovery of her husband's homosexuality. As she speaks the 'headlight of the locomotive glares into the room', interrupting her narrative and foreshadowing Stanley's impending exposure of her deceit. In her final confrontation with Mitch, he realises he has never seen her in the light and rips off the paper lantern to expose her falsehood, so destroying the illusion that she has so carefully created.

Props

Williams' use of props is an important tool in characterization and in making visual the central concerns of the play.

Drinks: Blanche drinks coke throughout the play and frequently asks Stella to run to the store to fetch a bottle. This serves to dramatize Blanche's delusions of grandeur as she makes Stella wait on her. In the fourth scene the coke spills over, staining Blanche's white skirt and symbolising her tarnished character. Her alcoholism results from her desperate need to escape the present. She tries to hide her drinking, claiming that she rarely drinks or that it is to calm her nerves. In contrast Stanley's drinking only exacerbates his tendency for brutish violence and contributes to the domestic dispute which ends scene three.

Costume jewellery and diamond tiara: These items highlight Blanche's fakery - her pretensions of wealth and sophistication are nothing more than gaudy ornaments that have no real value. In the second scene Stanley rummages through her possessions, believing she has deceived Stella; however we quickly learn that these are nothing more than rhinestones and inexpensive furs. In the penultimate scene, Blanche's diamond tiara indicates how far the character has descended into her delusions.



Meat: The meat package Stanley throws towards Stella on his first appearance marks him as the family's provider. Symbolically it suggests his animal, instinctual nature. As Blanche says it marks him as a 'survivor of the Stone Age. Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle'. It highlights the opposition between civility and savagery.

Paper Lantern: The Chinese lanterns that Blanche uses to cover the crude light bulb represent her instinct to avoid harsh reality. The lantern masks her ageing face and offers a more romantic view of the world. She explains this, saying that 'soft people have got to - shimmer and glow - put a - paper lantern over the light', meaning that because 'soft people' like her cannot fend for themselves they need to be alluring and attractive in order to survive.

Music and Sound Effects

Music and sound effects are a significant element of William's use of theatrical devices. These sound devices are used to establish the tone and atmosphere of the play, but also there is a strong connection to the characters. The blues piano and dissonant modernist music helps to capture the contemporary spirit of the quarter, the easy morality and vitality of the New Orleans streets and its multiculturalism. It is associated with Stanley who is dressed in blue denim and exemplifies the easy-going morality of the city. At times it intrudes into Blanche's interior world, pervading her thoughts and growing louder at key moments of stress. Blanche's mental confusion is signified by other sound effects such as the roar of the locomotive, the street vendor's calls and the jungle cries – all of which represent the impact of reality. The Varsouviana polka represents Blanche's guilty memories. Frequently she recalls the music she was dancing to when her husband died which serves to remind the audience of the character's vulnerability and signifies her mental decline in later scenes when the music becomes frantic and she cannot determine whether it is real or not.

Structure

The play consists of eleven consecutive scenes, rather than following the use of acts to divide the action as would have been conventional at the time. This episodic structure helps to heighten the dramatic tension. The first six scenes deal with Blanche's arrival in May and serve to establish the antagonistic relationship between the key characters as Blanche disrupts life in the Kowalski apartment. The final scenes move forward to September and progress towards a climactic confrontation between Stanley and Blanche. The gradual revelation of Blanche's disreputable past intensifies the drama of the play which climaxes with Blanche's physical and mental defeat at the hands of Stanley. The play's outcome is tragic with Blanche led away to a mental institution.

Language and Dialogue

Williams' use of dialogue is key in highlighting the differences between characters. Both Blanche and Stanley are defined by the way they speak; their backgrounds, attitudes and their association with Old South and New America are established through the dialogue and interactions with each other and other characters. Blanche's dialogue for example has a poetic quality, often rich in metaphors, and she takes



every opportunity to impress others with her higher education with frequent literary references and French and Spanish vocabulary. In contrast Stanley is straightforward and much more literal. His speech is colloquial, direct and he is tactless and outspoken. This is exemplified in the exchange between Blanche and Stanley near the end of scene two where Stanley explains to Blanche why he doesn't compliment women. Stanley's minimalistic replies ('That's right') contrast with Blanche's more lengthy statements. Also her comments that she prefers 'bold colours' and 'never cared for wishy-washy people' are carefully crafted to appeal to Stanley's character, knowing that he has a direct approach to life. At times Blanche's speech is poetically elegant but at others it is false rhetoric that sounds superficial and fabricated. This contrasts with Stanley who is often loud and vulgar.

In the play there is much imagery. Imagery of death pervades the play, for example the 'atmosphere of decay' and Blanche's death diatribe in Scene one, references to names such as 'Cemeteries' and 'Elysian Fields' and to the flowers for the dead being sold outside. Animal imagery is a key to understanding the characters. Stanley is referred to as an animal and a pig by Blanche and sometimes Stella. His association with animals is furthered in the stage directions where he is described as a proud 'male bird among the hens' to highlight his masculine sexuality. This is evident in the scene where he is violent with Stella. He 'stalks fiercely' into the bedroom and 'charges after' her when she calls him an 'animal thing'. Later when Stella has fled to Eunice's apartment he is 'like a baying hound' and the couple reunite with 'low, animal moans'. The imagery highlights Stanley's dominance over others and his brutal, animalistic instincts. Animal imagery is also used to describe the other characters: Stella is 'as plump as a little partridge' associating her with Stanley's male bird, and Blanche's manner and clothing is suggestive of a moth, indicating the delicate fragility of the character in contrast to Stanley's bestial nature, but also suggesting the character's flighty, inconsistent nature and her fatal attraction to light. There are many more references to animals that you should look out for.



A03: Contexts

In this examination, the candidate should demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which a play is written and received by drawing on appropriate information from outside the play.

No particular type of context will be stipulated in the question. However, contextual information which is made relevant to the key terms of the question will be rewarded. Students should be aware that little credit can be given for contextual information that is introduced merely for its own sake. They should remember that the text has primacy over the context. A good response will use contextual information sparingly and judiciously.

Biographical Context

Williams is recognised as one of the greatest American playwrights, gaining much notoriety with *A Streetcar Named Desire* following its production in 1947. Building on the success of his first play, the critically acclaimed *The Glass Menagerie*, *Streetcar* explores the decline of Southern gentility and the difficulty of accepting reality. Williams's personal life and experience is reflected in both plays.

Many of Williams' characters are based on his own family. Williams's mother Edwina was a beautiful belle born to a respectable Southern family, and like Blanche suffered from psychological problems and mental stress. She depended on her parents for financial support, and following the family's move to St. Louis she lost the privileges and social status she had enjoyed in her home town. Parallels can be drawn between Stanley and Cornelius Williams, the playwright's father who was an angry, argumentative drinker and gambler. The marriage was an unhappy one. Biographers note the move to St. Louis marked the decline of the family.

Williams's concern with the developing madness of his protagonists is based on his own experiences. He was a sensitive boy and found much solace in writing, but his sister Rose had no such escape and, like Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*, created a world of glass ornaments as a means of detaching herself from reality. She became mentally unstable, suffering from a form of schizophrenia as she grew older and eventually her mother authorised a lobotomy which left her institutionalized. Williams too had psychological problems, suffering a mental breakdown in his twenties and he regretted the fact that he was not there to save his sister. Stella is faced with a similar predicament in *A Streetcar Named Desire* when she decides to commit Blanche to a mental institution. His family's history of psychosis made him paranoid. In later life, despite the success of his plays, Williams suffered from depression which was exacerbated by his excessive drug taking and alcoholism.

Williams's choice of setting can also be linked to his biography. Although he was nicknamed Tennessee, he was born in Mississippi. Blanche's romanticisation of her family mansion can be linked to Williams's maternal grandparents whom he adored, and it is his nostalgia for this way of life that inspired his writing: "I write out of a love for the South.... a way of life that I am just old enough to remember." The setting for *Streetcar* and its busy, lively atmosphere, is drawn from Williams's own experiences when he moved to New Orleans in 1938. The French Quarter had a reputation for its decadence and easy morality.



More information about Williams's life and career can be found at *The Poetry Foundation* website. www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/tennessee-williams

Historical Context

In the play, published in 1947, Williams explores the social tensions in America following the upheaval of the Second World War. The play is representative of the changes to American culture and what some saw as the decline of civilisation following America's emergence as a modern capitalist power.

The drama depicts the decline of the Old South and its advantaged way of life. In the nineteenth century the success of the Southern states' economy, which was largely agrarian, depended on the exploitation of slaves. In the aftermath of the American Civil War and with the abolition of slavery, the wealth of the plantations waned. This did not affect the Northern states, whose economy was based on industry and while the Southern states suffered economically the North improved. In the twentieth century the economy prospered and industrialisation increased in the cities. Many writers like Williams were interested in the decay of the grandeur of Southern culture as a result of urban development and modernization.

This struggle between North and South is reflected in the opposing values expressed by Stanley and Blanche. Where Blanche symbolises the old world values of the South, Stanley, a decorated soldier and son of a Polish immigrant, represents the new America. Williams's portrayal of Stanley matches the experience of many men of the time, returning home from the war – the everyday American, a hardworking and self-made man in pursuit of the American Dream. *A Streetcar Named Desire* explores the impact of these cultural changes and the way materialist values have destroyed the charm of the Old South.

It is also important to consider the role and position of women in the 1940s. Stanley's reference to the Napoleonic Code in Louisiana in the second scene hints at the cultural misogyny that restricted women in American society. As Southern ladies, the roles open to Blanche and Stella are narrowly defined. Both women are constrained by social expectations of chastity and passivity, and are dependent on men for survival. Mitch's rejection of Blanche because of her sexual freedom reflects the social hypocrisy of the time.

Literary Context

The play can be viewed in many different literary contexts. Firstly it can be read as a modern tragedy. Like other modern tragedians such as Miller and O'Neill, Williams focuses on domestic conflict, finding interest in the minor dramas of common people. The plot centres on Blanche's fall in social status as she is confronted with her sleazy past and the fatal flaws of her character which lead to her ruin. The influence of Ibsen and his use of social realism is apparent in Williams's writing with the realistic details of the city and apartment, and the rendering of a family drama exploring themes such as class and gender relationships. Finally it is important to consider the way in which Williams broke with the tradition of realism in his development of what he termed 'plastic theatre', a non-realist style which exploits expressionistic devices to symbolically reflect the psyche of the characters on stage. (See the A02 Dramatic Methods section for a more detailed exploration of Williams's technique.)



A05: Argument and interpretation

In this examination, the candidate should offer opinion or judgment in response to the given reading of the text, taking account of the key terms as the basis of the argument. This AO is the driver of Unit AS 1: Section B and is of primary importance. A05 can be satisfied in full by the candidate developing his/her own reading in response to the given reading. If, however, critics are used, they must be:

- *used with understanding*
- *incorporated into the argument to reinforce or be seen as an alternative to the student's opinion*
- *not used as a substitute for the development of the student's own opinion*
- *properly acknowledged.*

Coherence and relevance of argument will be rewarded. Students should be aware of the importance of planning in the sequencing, development and illustration of the reading they wish to put forward. They should also beware of the danger of replacing the key terms of the question with others of their own choosing which they assume mean much the same thing.

Specimen Question:

Blanche is a victim of the fact that she is female.

With reference to the dramatic methods used in the play, and relevant contextual information, **show to what extent** you agree with this statement.

In order to construct a meaningful and cogent argument (and to move beyond making simple assertions and offering unsupported opinions) students should use A02 and A03 elements to support and enhance their point of view. Convincing arguments will be based on a secure understanding of how Williams has used dramatic methods (A02) to convey his message. Students will also encounter difficulties in presenting an argument which is focused on the stimulus statement without knowledge of the context(s) in which the play is set (A03).

It is not necessary for a candidate to fully agree or disagree with the stimulus statement. Indeed, it is likely that a sophisticated argument will negotiate a response to the key terms of the question in a more considered and tempered fashion than is suggested by the stimulus statement.

In planning a coherent and relevant response to this statement, candidates should consider relevant social and historical contextual material relating to gender and this should be linked to the key themes/issues with which Williams is concerned.

- Male/female stereotypes and gender roles which ensure male dominance.

Traditionally women are thought of as the weaker sex, valued for their beauty and expected to be submissive and virtuous whereas men are the providers, physically powerful and dominant. Does Blanche represent these stereotypes and what are the consequences of not adhering to these defined roles? In the play Blanche portrays



herself as a 'soft' character and continually tries to win male approval with her looks and feminine charms. However there is another aspect to Blanche's character which contradicts these pretences.

- The Old South and notions of the Southern belle.

Consider the Old South's nineteenth-century views of women. To what extent do the Southern ideals of chastity, purity and social manners in relation to women influence attitudes towards women in the twentieth-century? How did this legacy impact on Blanche and the way she is characterised by Williams? How far does Blanche attempt to maintain the Southern myths of genteel womanhood and how far does she rebel against them in her liaisons with other men? Is she a victim of her upbringing?

- Views of women in post-war America

During the war years of the 1940s women stepped in to fill the jobs of men while they were fighting in Europe, but as soldiers returned home the majority of women left their jobs and reverted to the domestic sphere. Both Blanche and Stella contend with sexist views and treatment of women, for example Stanley and his insistence on his proprietorial rights and use of domestic violence to control and dominate. How does the dialogue of the male characters emphasise the double standards regarding the sexual morality of women which leaves Blanche ostracised?

- Marriage and dependency on men

As a result of the decline of the Southern plantations and the limited employment opportunities available for women, characters like Blanche and Stella depend financially on men. Men's ability to earn led to feelings of superiority much like those expressed by Stanley. The solution to Blanche's situation in her view is to win the affections of Mitch, who could offer her some economic stability through marriage. Later her vain attempt to get in touch with Shep Huntleigh symbolises the futility of her romantic notions.

- Williams's portrayal of Blanche and Stanley

Consideration should be given to the way in which Williams' portrays Blanche's character as a symbolic female opposite to Stanley's brutish masculinity through the dialogue, imagery and colour symbolism.

Other contextual areas/information will of course be accepted provided relevance is demonstrated.

Of course, candidates may present alternative arguments, disagreeing with the idea that Blanche is a victim, for example suggesting that her demise is a result of her own passions and inability to cope with modern reality, or that she is a victim of the clash between Old South and New America.



A Streetcar Named Desire: Activities and Revision Exercises

Plot

- Create a timeline of events for the play and for each individual character.
- Draw a diagram to illustrate events in order of importance, considering the extent to which each event contributed to Blanche's downfall. Find evidence in the play to support your opinions.

Characters

Introducing the characters

1. Analyse each character's first appearance on stage.
 - a. Highlight references to colour.
 - b. Note what is revealed about the character's personality in the stage directions.
2. Investigate the way each character reacts to others when first meeting on stage.
 - a. How do the character's language and actions change?
 - b. Is there anything underlying each character's comments?
 - c. What is the source of the conflict between the characters?

Explore the characters in more detail

- Analyse the way Williams juxtaposes the characters of Blanche and Stanley.
- Listen and make notes on Gillian Anderson discussing her role as Blanche DuBois www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjUsTtD798M. Consider how she portrays the character's vulnerability.

Theme

- Annotate a section of the script, considering how Williams presents the key themes of the play. Explore the following:
 - a. What events occur that link to the theme?
 - b. Which characters are involved? How do they interact with each other?
 - c. Note 2 – 3 key quotations and explain their significance.
 - d. How does this theme link to previous/later scenes?
 - e. Overall how important is the theme and what is Williams trying to show about the issue?

Setting

- Look at the opening stage directions. Highlight the following using different colours:
 - a. Realistic and unrealistic elements of the setting.
 - b. Colours.
 - c. Contrasts and oppositions e.g. decay/life, white/black, old/new.
 - d. Details which might have symbolic significance.



- Annotate the text, commenting on your observations and make notes for revision under the following headings:
 - a. Setting.
 - b. Lighting effects.
 - c. Characters.
 - d. Sound effects.
 - e. Research any unfamiliar key words or phrases e.g. 'Elysian', 'L&N tracks'.

Music

- Compare the different types of music in the play e.g. the blues piano, the Varsouviana polka, Blanche's 'Paper Moon' song, thinking about what each comes to suggest to the audience.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGpnSo49t_w

www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBxk6GnlWgY&list=PL1NmpNuMHctgN7xuhMvg2Epar9IlhUCn

www.youtube.com/watch?v=gapCK5_rMuY

- Trace Williams's use of music in a particular scene, noting what is happening when it is used, how the volume and pace correspond to the action, whom it is associated with, the effect created. Explain its significance to the themes.
- Explore the way each piece of music is used as a motif in the play, looking at how it differs in the initial scenes and in later scenes of the play.

Language and Dialogue

- Compare the language of each character in a particular scene. For example look at the differences between Stella, Blanche and Stanley's dialogue in Scene 4. Does their language change in the course of the scene? Why?
- Discuss the way Williams presents Mitch and Blanche through their dialogue in this scene. How does it compare with their first meeting in Scene 3? Comment on the effect of the figurative language used.

Context

- Research Williams's life and literary career. Select only those events which are relevant to understanding *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Suggested websites:

www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/tennessee-williams

www.gradesaver.com/author/tennessee-williams

www.notablebiographies.com/We-Z/Williams-Tennessee.html



- In groups further research the following historical contexts and create a PowerPoint presentation to demonstrate your findings:
 - a. The decline of the American South.
 - b. Women and their position in post-war America.
 - c. The American Dream.
 - d. The French Quarter in New Orleans.



GLOSSARY

Antagonist	The main character who opposes the protagonist or hero in a narrative or drama; in simplistic terms he/she is the villain. (See protagonist.)
Characterisation	The means by which a character's traits are established, often through action and dialogue in drama.
Climax	The moment of greatest tension in a drama. It is usually near the end of the play where the rising conflict results in a high point of intensity.
Costume	The clothes or outfit worn by a character.
Dialogue	The conversation between two or more characters in a play, novel or poem.
Dramatic convention	Dramatic convention - a set of rules which all parties in a dramatic performance accept (including, importantly the audience), e.g. the 'Three Unities' in classical Greek drama, the Shakespearean soliloquy, the missing fourth wall of a traditional nineteenth-century stage set.
Dramatic irony	A stylistic device where the audience is aware of the implications of a speech or act, but the character(s) is not. The audience has an understanding that the characters involved do not have.
Expressionism	A style of drama which offers a symbolic or abstract representation of reality, reflecting the subjective experience of characters. Often uses techniques of distortion.
Foreshadowing	Suggestions or hints about later events in the play.
Imagery	This word generally applies visually, to vivid or figurative language used in a more than literal way that stimulates a picture in the imagination. Tactile imagery appeals to the sense of touch. Auditory imagery appeals to the imagination by echoing or creating sound effects.
Juxtaposition	Placing two contrasting characters, things, ideas close together to illuminate meaning or create tension.
Lighting	Refers to the way the stage is lit and the equipment which provides artificial light effects.
Metaphor	Where one thing is described directly as another, to enhance meaning or effect. When this is used for a more protracted purpose it is called an extended metaphor.
Motif	A dominant or recurring idea or figure of speech within a work of art or within the work of an artist, musician or writer.



Plastic theatre	A non-realist style which exploits expressionist devices to symbolically reflect the psyche of the characters on stage.
Props	Items used on stage by the actors.
Protagonist	The principal character in a novel or drama (See antagonist).
Stage/Set design	This refers to the visual scenery on the stage, the creation of the background in which the play is set.
Stage directions	The directions written in the play script to indicate how the characters should speak and move. In Streetcar Williams's stage directions also detail the mood and atmosphere and the stage set.
Social Realism	The realistic depiction of life in a play or other work of literature. Social realism tends to focus on the everyday conditions of the working class, often with a political or social message.
Sound effects	Sounds on the stage used to create the setting or atmosphere of the play, or for other dramatic effect.
Structure	The way in which the parts of the plot are organised.
Symbol/symbolism	A thing that represents something else, often a concrete object to represent abstract concepts e.g. the coke to symbolise Blanche's stained reputation.
Theme	A main idea or concern explored in a work of art.
Tragedy	A work of literature that results in a catastrophic or disastrous conclusion for its character(s). For further information research Aristotle's definition of the features of tragedy, and the features of modern tragedy.