

Volume 36, Number 1, September 2025

Practice exam question

'We danced the Varsouviana!'

Luke McBratney

Guidance for the question on p. 32 of the magazine.

The middle of an answer

Perhaps the moment when Blanche's past returns most directly is in Scene Six. As McBratney notes, this midpoint of the play is 'a peak of drama and is crucial to understanding the play's protagonist.' In the postwar, conservative moral climate of the American South, a woman's sexual history was often judged harshly, and Williams uses Blanche's memories of the night when Allan committed suicide to both reveal her vulnerabilities and challenge the audience's potential prejudices. These memories from the past deepen our understanding of her present character and — through Williams's dramatic techniques — draw us into her perspective, fostering sympathy and empathy. The use of a monologue lets Blanche recount events vividly, building suspense and dread. At first, she describes the relationship with Allan in evocative, metaphorical terms: her 'discovery — love' is like 'a blinding light on something that had been in half shadow.' This light imagery foreshadows her later explanation of her aversion to bright light after Allan's death: 'the searchlight ... was turned off again' and 'never for one moment since has there been any light ... stronger than this — kitchen — candle.' In Benedict Andrews' 2014 Young Vic staging, Gillian Anderson as Blanche delivers this monologue with the stage bathed in a sudden, harsh light as she recalls discovering love before the lighting drains into cold shadow when she says 'the searchlight ... was turned off again.' This literalises the metaphor for the audience, making the emotional contrast physically visible and increasing our empathy.

As the monologue progresses, Blanche shifts from metaphor to plain, urgent language. Short, terse statements such as 'Then I found out' quicken the pace and heighten suspense, while specific details — like 'Moon Lake Casino' and 'the Varsouviana' — anchor the account in reality. Williams also layers dramatic effects from both the external world and Blanche's mind. A locomotive's 'glaring' headlight as it 'thunders' past amplifies the danger and shock as she recalls discovering 'two people' in the room. Similarly, the recurring Varsouviana polka — an aural motif from Blanche's mind — is heard on stage, enabling us to enter into her subjective world and prompting a visceral connection to her trauma. Through these methods, the past becomes more than backstory: it explains Blanche's present behaviour and invites the audience to see her moral failings in context. This deepened identification with the protagonist makes the play's tragic denouement all the more powerful.

However, some might question whether Williams romanticises Blanche and her presentation of her past. The combination of literary and dramatic effects — the lyrical imagery of light and shadow, the heightened theatricality of music and lighting and the potentially melodramatic acting from the actor playing Blanche — risks casting Blanche's account of the past in a glow of tragic heroism. This might change the audience's judgement of her later deception and cruelty. If they view her as putting on a performance to ensnare Mitch, seeing her melodramatic monologue and accompanying actions as calculated rather than spontaneous, they might feel less sympathetic towards her at the end of the

play. In performance, the balance can shift. While the Young Vic production heightened emotional identification and sympathy, other productions have treated the Varsouviana as a disturbing intrusion that alienates the audience from Blanche. Such differences underline how the significance of Blanche's past is not fixed in the text alone but emerges in the interplay between Williams' methods, directorial choices and audience reception.

Commentary

This is a cogent and assured argument that engages perceptively with the task. From the opening, the student frames the discussion clearly, using a critical viewpoint from the *English Review* article to set up the focus on Scene Six and the significance of Blanche's past. The argument is perceptive and assured, moving logically from context to close analysis and to a discussion of audience reception.

There is an insightful understanding of authorial methods. The student shows how Williams uses structure (placing the scene at the midpoint), language (metaphors of light and shadow, terse statements) and dramatic effects (music, lighting, sound) to shape meaning and influence the audience. The analysis is detailed and insightful, with ideas well supported by apt textual references. Quotations are integrated smoothly into the argument and explored for their effect.

The student also makes assured use of context, linking Blanche's treatment in the play to the moral climate of the postwar American South. This historicist perspective is not bolted on but embedded naturally in the discussion of the scene.

Perceptive connections are made between text and performance. The comparison between Benedict Andrews' Young Vic staging and other interpretations shows an assured awareness that meaning is created not only by the written text but also by directorial choices and audience reception. This strengthens the exploration of different interpretations by showing different possible debates about Blanche: is she presented as a tragic heroine, or as a calculating manipulator?

Throughout, the student writes with assurance and maturity, using critical terminology and concepts — like 'metaphor', 'aural motif', 'subjective world' and 'audience reception' — fluently and appropriately. The expression is mature and impressive. The final paragraph is particularly strong because it synthesises the analysis and evaluative debate: the significance of Blanche's past is shown to depend on the interplay between Williams' methods, performance decisions and audience response.

This resource is part of ENGLISH REVIEW, a magazine written for A-level students by subject experts. To subscribe to the full magazine, go to <https://www.hachettelearning.com/english/english-review>