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Practice exam question

From page to stage

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Guidance for the question on p. 27 of the magazine.

The middle of an answer

Furthermore, the significance of the stage directions becomes more obvious at key moments of the drama. For example, in Scene 6, Williams' stage directions become increasingly insistent, demonstrating the significance of what he termed 'plastic theatre', which Hannah Greenstreet explains is 'a style of theatre that moves beyond realism to express truth through expressionism'. We can see this through Blanche's recollection of Allan's suicide. It is not presented through dialogue alone; instead, sound, light and physical movement combine to transform memory into spectacle. The stage direction that a locomotive is 'heard approaching outside' initially appears naturalistic. It evokes a diegetic sound – one that comes from the world of the play, since the apartment is next to the railway lines. Yet the combined lighting and sound effects as the 'headlight of the locomotive ... thunders past', just as Blanche reaches a dramatic peak in her story (discovering 'two people', who she implies are Allan and his male lover), intensify the moment beyond realism. The intrusion of mechanical force mirrors the violence of the revelation and foreshadows the inexorable exposure she will later face.

More striking still is Williams' use of music to move the audience, develop characterisation and heighten drama. The Varsouviana polka, which is non-diegetic – not a sound from the world of the play – exists in Blanche's mind, unheard by other characters but heard by the audience. Accordingly, even though Blanche's inner world becomes increasingly fractured, confused and irrational, the audience is compelled to hear what she hears and, at some level, to identify with her as they respond emotionally to her story. This auditory motif from Blanche's mind recurs during her monologue and signals a shift from external action to psychological interiority. While Blanche remembers how 'we pretended nothing had been discovered', the music, which plays 'in a minor key, faint with distance' functions as a kind of calm before the storm. The way in which it 'stops abruptly' at the point when Blanche exclaims 'a shot!', adds impact to this crisis point. When it 'resumes in a major key', the happy, jaunty tune provides an ironic counterpoint to Blanche's desperate run out to the edge of the lake to see what happened. Thus, Williams uses the polka to punctuate emotional crisis. At the end of the scene, he perhaps uses it even more subtly. After Mitch appears to suggest marriage to Blanche, Williams creates a quiet, intimate and loving mood on stage. This is seen in the stage directions for the actors, for example, Mitch is 'drawing her slowly into his arms', suggesting gentleness, comfort and protection and Blanche is 'sobbing' in relief. When 'The polka tune fades out', the audience feels that Blanche's troubled mind is eased and that perhaps she has worked through her worst traumatic experience and might be healed as a result. Thus, rather than merely describing trauma, Williams' stage directions – or rather the dramatic effects they describe – compel the audience to experience it through sound and silence. In doing so, he shapes our response, immersing us in the ebb and flow of Blanche's fractured consciousness and complicating our moral judgements of her behaviour.

Commentary

This is a confident and assured middle section that develops the argument in a perceptive and sophisticated way. Rather than attempting to cover every aspect of Blanche's past, the student sharpens the discussion by concentrating on a single pivotal moment – Scene 6 – and by exploring how Williams' stage directions shape the significance of that past. This demonstrates sophisticated control of structure: the first paragraph builds logically from the theoretical idea of 'plastic theatre' to close analysis of the locomotive stage direction, and the answer sustains a coherent and assured line of argument throughout.

The response is particularly strong in its handling of authorial methods (AO2). In the first paragraph, the student does not merely identify stage directions but analyses how they function. The answer explores both precise details and wider structural effects, such as foreshadowing and the blending of realism and expressionism. The distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic sound is precise and confidently explained, and the locomotive is explored both as a realistic element of setting and as a symbolic intrusion that foreshadows Blanche's later exposure. This dual reading shows perceptive engagement with Williams' theatrical methods and demonstrates how technical choices contribute to the play's larger tragic trajectory.

The second paragraph develops the argument further by shifting the focus from external sound (the locomotive) to the more overtly expressionist use of music. The analysis of the Varsouviana polka is especially assured. The student tracks the musical motif through its shifts in key, volume and timing ('minor key', 'stops abruptly', 'resumes in a major key', 'fades out'), demonstrating how sound structures the scene and punctuates emotional crisis. This sustained attention to detail models high-level AO2: quotations are integrated smoothly and explored for their dramatic effects rather than simply cited. By showing how music both reflects Blanche's psychological state and shapes audience response, the student moves beyond identification of dramatic techniques to the interpretation of their significance.

The argument develops cogently. The first paragraph establishes the blending of realism and symbolism through the locomotive; the second intensifies this analysis by exploring how non-diegetic music immerses the audience in Blanche's interior world. This structural progression mirrors the movement of Blanche's monologue and reinforces the central claim that stage directions are crucial in making her past theatrically significant. The concluding sentences of the second paragraph return explicitly to 'significance', synthesising the analysis by showing how Williams' dramatic effects shape audience judgement and complicate moral response.

Context is used economically and effectively. The reference to 'plastic theatre' via Greenstreet is not deployed as a substitute for analysis but as a concise way of articulating a complex theatrical concept. The student then applies and develops this idea through close reading of the text. This integrated use of a critical view is assured: the critic supports and sharpens the student's own argument rather than overshadowing it.

Overall, the writing is fluent, confident and perceptive. The expression is mature and impressive, and critical terminology and concepts are used with purpose and assurance.

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