



**STUDY
REVISE** **AND**
for AS/A-level

A Streetcar Named Desire

by Tennessee Williams

- Written by experienced teachers and examiners
- Learn how to respond critically to your text
- In-depth analysis of all aspects of the text

Nicola Onyett

Series Editors:

Nicola Onyett and Luke McBratney

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Contents

Using this guide.....	iv
Introduction.....	vi
1 Synopsis.....	1
2 Scene summaries and commentaries.....	3
3 Themes.....	21
4 Characters.....	25
5 Writer's methods: form, structure and language.....	30
6 Contexts.....	59
7 Working with the text.....	85
Assessment Objectives and skills.....	85
Building skills 1: Structuring your writing.....	88
Building skills 2: Analysing texts in detail.....	95
Top ten quotations.....	101
Taking it further.....	105



Themes

Target your learning

- What are the key themes of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and how does Williams develop them as the dramatic action unfolds? (AO1)
- What dramatic methods does Williams use to illustrate his key themes? (AO2)

The Italian author Primo Levi declared in his book *Other People's Trades* (1989) that 'all authors have had the opportunity of being astonished by the beautiful and awful things that the critics have found in their works and that they did not know they had put there'. Often, we have no means of knowing an author's intentions; what is important is the impact of the text on a reader or, in the case of a play, an audience. Even if an author has written explicitly about what he or she sees as the key thematic content of a work, that does not preclude other themes from coming to the attention of particular readers. Moreover, Williams' work cannot be divorced from the circumstances of his life, values, assumptions, gender, race and class, and just as he was a product of his age, so you are a product of yours. How you respond to *A Streetcar Named Desire* will depend on your own experiences, ideas and values and it is well worth thinking about how readers and audiences decide what the major themes of any literary text are.

Reality and illusion

Williams' famously poetic stage directions, in which Blanche is likened to a fluttering white moth who must avoid the light, suggest that she craves 'magic' because the truth about post-war America is too harsh to bear. Her antagonist, Stanley, on the other hand, is imbued with an earthy – even brutal – sense of realism which makes him loathe her 'Barnum and Bailey world' and do all he can to trash it. Thus the theme of fantasy and reality plays out on stage as another aspect of the desperate struggle between the play's protagonist and antagonist. Which character you decide to side with is up to you. When Stanley rapes Blanche he uses the disturbingly incongruous word 'date' to describe what he has planned for her, as if they are lovers who have passed a pleasant evening in each other's company; thus he ensures that her Shep Huntleigh illusion is utterly destroyed. The question of how far illusions are helpful or necessary remains; ironically, as Felicia Hardison Londré notes, it is only when Blanche actually tells Mitch the truth for once – about the death of Allan Grey – that she finally gains 'what she has not been able to achieve in two months or so of artful deceit: a proposal of marriage' (Londré in M. Roudané, *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, 1997).

CRITICAL VIEW

According to Christopher Innes, *Streetcar* contains all of Williams' 'major themes: the ambiguous nature of sexuality, the betrayal of faith, the corruption of modern America, the over-arching battle of artistic sensitivity against physical materialism' (Innes in S. McEvoy).

Liebestod: (from the German meaning 'love death') an erotic union achieved by lovers only through or after death.

Taking it further ►►

In both F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1936) the tragic central characters' dreams are ended with a violent gunshot. Look at these two novels and think about how far you agree that they – and *Streetcar* – present dreams as transient and illusory, but rare and valuable nonetheless.

Death and desire

Streetcar was one of the first post-war dramas to present a range of characters for whom sex was of huge importance as a factor influencing their lives and relationships. One of the text's defining images – that of the streetcar – explicitly links sex and death, making it possible to see the play within the context of the **Liebestod** tradition.

At first glance it might seem a struggle to position *Streetcar* within this literary framework (after all, nobody dies at the end) but in fact the **Liebestod** theme may be seen to enhance (or parody) the romantic and tragic grandeur of Blanche's downfall, depending on your point of view.

Very early in the play the English teacher Blanche makes the first of her evocative and suggestive literary references when she likens the chain of events which culminated in the loss of Belle Reve to something 'Only Poe! Only Mr. Edgar Allan Poe!' could conceive, as her DuBois forebears went to rack and ruin through indulging in their 'epic fornications'. The specific situation to which she refers here – the fall of a once great family and their home – calls to mind Poe's Gothic horror story *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), with Blanche as the persecuted Madeline who is entombed, while still alive, by her twin brother. Blanche's awareness of her own fate is signalled by her horrified reaction to the Mexican Woman with her flowers for the dead, and while Stanley is her brother-in-law and not her brother, his rape does indeed consign her to a kind of death-in-life which seems to resemble Madeline's as she is 'entombed' within the walls of a lunatic asylum.

Like her husband Allan, whose homosexuality led directly to his death, Blanche is a figure for whom sex and death are fatally entwined. Following Allan's suicide, Blanche is left with a morbid fear of ageing, and in some ways her attraction to very young men suggests that in seducing them she hopes to recapture something of her own lost youth and innocence. Yet the love (or sex, or desire) with which Blanche tries to fight off death is also the direct cause of her tragic fall, the sickness as well as the cure.

Context

Blanche likens her experiences at Belle Reve to the Gothic horror stories of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49). Poe, who died in poverty at the age of 40, was a master of the short story. *The Fall of the House of Usher* is a characteristic work that you might enjoy reading; another is *The Masque of the Red Death*.

Context

Two of the most famous texts from within the English literary tradition to deal with the *Liebestod* theme are Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1595) and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), while in Stephenie Meyer's popular teenage *Twilight* series, the heroine, Bella Swan, can only achieve a permanent relationship with Edward Cullen after she too has become a vampire.

On several further occasions throughout the play, literary references are used to evoke images of famous women, real and fictional, who have suffered and died for love. Introducing herself to Mitch during Stanley's poker night, Blanche tells him that she's an English teacher struggling to 'instil a bunch of bobby-soxers and drug-store Romeos with reverence for Hawthorne and Whitman and Poe!'. The reference to 'Romeos' is doubly ironic, in view of her fatal attraction to underage boys, while the mention of Nathaniel Hawthorne evokes the image of Hester Prynne, the heroine of his most famous novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), who is shunned and scorned by her narrow-minded Puritan community for adultery and fornication.

Later Blanche assumes the role of the doomed courtesan Marguerite, heroine of Dumas' tragic romance *La Dame aux Camélias*, casting the hapless Mitch as her much younger lover, Armand, before referring to his physical strength by calling him 'Samson', a reference to the Old Testament strongman betrayed by the fatal temptress Delilah. Finally, and perhaps most ominously, however, it is Stanley who provides the last literary figure with whom we are invited to compare *Streetcar's* doomed heroine. He viciously parodies Blanche's 'hoity-toity' affectations by likening her to Cleopatra: '... lo and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are the Queen of the Nile!'

Marginality and madness: the outcast

According to Alycia Smith-Howard and Greta Heintzelman, Williams 'is celebrated as "a poet of the human heart" and as the "Laureate of the Outcast"' (Smith-Howard and Heintzelman, *Critical Companion to Tennessee Williams*, 2005). In 1939, the playwright told his literary agent Audrey Wood, 'I have only one major theme for my work, which is the destructive power of society on the sensitive non-conformist individual' and in *Streetcar* Blanche is indeed cast out of society because she refuses to conform to conventional moral values. Forced to confess her sins, she is then viciously punished.

The ancient Greek word for tragedy means 'goat-song' and Blanche is surely the scapegoat here, cast out of society in order to bear the sins of others. While Stanley, previously dismissed as an uncouth '**Polack**', is socially on the up, Blanche is gradually stripped of her psychological, sexual, financial and cultural

Top ten quotation

identity. At the end of the play, Blanche is forced to retreat into a state of denial, her mental health all but shattered, in order to shield her fragile sense of self from Stanley's brutal truth.

Context

The American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64) often explored the darker side of human existence in his morally and psychologically intricate works, the most famous of which is *The Scarlet Letter*.



Characters

Target your learning

- How does Williams develop his characters as the dramatic action unfolds? **(AO1)**
- What dramatic methods does Williams use to shape the audience's responses to the characters? **(AO2)**

One of the most common errors made by students is to write about characters in literature as if they were real people as opposed to fictional constructs created to fulfil a range of purposes in different texts. When it comes to a play, the 'language' belonging to each character is a blueprint for their interpretation by different actors, and one important aspect of analysis is to consider the range of potential performances of a text.

Characters in a play are defined through language and action. What they do, what they say, how they say it, and what other characters say about them, determine the response of the audience. On stage these techniques of characterisation are enhanced by costume, gesture, facial expression, proxemics (the distance between actors which indicates the relationship between the characters) and other performance features.

As well as the brief sketches below, there is more information about the main characters in several other sections of this book, particularly the *Scene summaries and commentaries*, *Themes* and *Contexts*.

TASK

Look online at the painting 'Poker Night' (from *A Streetcar Named Desire*) (1948) by Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975). Jessica Tandy, who created the role of Blanche, felt that this overtly sexualised image was a misrepresentation. How far do you agree with her view?



▲ Stella and Blanche in the 2014 London production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Main characters

Blanche DuBois

For many Williams fans, Blanche DuBois is his quintessential heroine, psychologically damaged, emotionally fragile, socially liminal and culturally dispossessed. When Eunice first sees her dressed in those utterly incongruous floating white clothes she asks: 'What's the matter, honey? Are you lost?'. Indeed she is; in fact Blanche is the archetypal lost soul, but Williams makes her an insensitive, prickly and often irritating character rather than one the audience necessarily identifies with and pities from the outset. Blanche is an ageing Southern belle on the wrong side of thirty, whose tragic and stormy life has led her to avoid reality in favour of what she dreamily refers to as 'magic'. As the play progresses, Blanche's instability grows as Stanley strips away her fantasy life and wrecks her relationship with Mitch. Haunted by all she has lost – her first love, her home, her culture, her dignity and her place in the world – her life is already a sexual, emotional and economic disaster zone when she arrives in Elysian Fields. Underneath her unpleasantly snobbish arrogance lies a vulnerable and damaged psyche. Loneliness and a lack of self-esteem has led her to come close to prostitution and she sees marrying Mitch as her only way out. However, Stanley's merciless persecution of her culminates in a brutal rape which triggers her complete mental breakdown.

Stanley Kowalski

Proud to be a second-generation Polish American, at the beginning of the play Stanley Kowalski appears to be a loyal friend, a passionate husband and a genial host. A decorated soldier who fought in World War II, Stanley is down-to-earth, forceful and practical; Blanche's genteel fictions and fantasies drive him crazy. At first he may well have the audience's sympathy when Blanche ignorantly refers to him as a 'Polack', and it is not hard to see that his hatred of her stems from the genteel Southern past she represents as well as her infuriating airs and graces. As time goes on, however, Stanley's behaviour towards Blanche becomes increasingly hostile and vicious to the point where it is clearly unjustified by any of her actions. By the time the play ends the audience has witnessed Stanley bullying his friends, abusing his pregnant wife and raping his fragile sister-in-law. The nature of Stanley's relationship with Stella is at the very heart of the play; the ways in which it alters, changes and deteriorates are profoundly influenced by Blanche's arrival in New Orleans. The final tableau of Stanley soothing the sobbing Stella may be seen to pose uncomfortable questions about the criteria by which Blanche has been socially excluded.

Stella Kowalski

Stella's name embodies the tension between her former life at Belle Reve and her new life in Elysian Fields; Blanche's 'Stella for star' has become Stanley's 'STELLAHHHH!' Unlike her sister, Stella got away from Belle Reve during the war and made her way to New Orleans where she met Stanley; only during a time of such immense social, cultural and historical upheaval would the aristocratic Stella DuBois have met the working-class Stanley Kowalski. Like her sister, Stella is a sexually passionate woman and although she pities Blanche and wants to protect her, she refuses to allow herself to believe her accusation of rape. Stella's decision to go for fantasy over reality in the end seems to indicate that she is a DuBois born and bred after all.

Harold 'Mitch' Mitchell

Though on the surface Mitch seems lumbering, gauche and ungainly, he is a sensitive and kindly soul at heart. Teased as a 'mama's boy', Mitch wants to marry so that his mother can die in peace, knowing that he won't be left alone after her death. Mitch and Blanche, having both loved and lost, believe they can comfort one another. When Stanley tells him the truth about Blanche's past, however, Mitch feels Blanche has made a fool of him with her virginal Southern belle act and tries to force her to sleep with him; he weeps when she is taken away to the asylum. While some readers and audiences may see Mitch as a clownish character, others may view him as a tragic figure in his own right.

Eunice Hubbel

Stella's friend, neighbour and landlady, Eunice may foreshadow the life Stella will come to lead a few years down the line as she fights with her husband, the philandering Steve, before noisily making up with him. At the end of the play, although she assures Stella that she is right to reject Blanche's story of rape and has no choice but to stick with Stanley, Eunice nevertheless behaves with sensitivity towards Blanche.

Steve Hubbel

Eunice's husband Steve is one of Stanley's poker buddies. A loutish and lecherous drunk, he may well suggest what Stanley will become in the future. Interestingly, however, when Steve seems uneasy at Blanche's removal to the asylum, it suggests – albeit temporarily – that even Stanley's poker buddies are aware that they are witnessing something terrible. Steve has the very last line of the play, when in the absence of Stanley, who is outside the apartment comforting Stella, he announces that normal service in Elysian Fields has been resumed after Blanche's removal: **'This game is seven-card stud'**.

Taking it further ➤

Williams' presentation of sexual tension and class conflict as inextricably linked in the downfall of an iconic female protagonist echoes both Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1890) and August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1888). Look at one or both of these plays. What similarities and differences in plot and character can you trace?

TASK

Depending on how Stella is played, her character could come across as more or less sympathetic. How would you choose to present her if you were directing the play, and what elements of Williams' characterisation and dialogue would sway your decision?

Top ten quotation

TASK

Smith-Howard and Heintzelman (2005) describe Mitch as 'middle-aged' but when he is first seen with Stanley in Scene I, the stage directions describe '*two men ... about twenty-eight or thirty years old*' (page 4). Whereas actors Karl Malden (1951) and John Goodman (1995) do indeed seem middle-aged, Randy Quaid (1984) looks younger. Watch extracts from their performances on DVD or YouTube and discuss with the other students in your class which Mitch you find most convincing and authentic, and why.

Build critical skills

Collate all the textual information that relates to Allan Grey and assess what Williams' representation of this gentle young man suggests about Blanche's past. How does he differ from the main flesh-and-blood male characters, Stanley and Mitch?

Other characters

Pablo

Another poker player, whose ethnic roots show the cultural diversity of Elysian Fields. He, too, is troubled by Blanche's removal.

Allan Grey

Although Allan Grey never appears on stage he is an extremely important character; Blanche has never got over her guilt at his death nor found another love to replace him. Blanche was an innocent 16-year-old when they married and, given the contemporary stigma around homosexuality, would have had no idea why her sensitive and artistic young husband was unable to consummate their marriage on the wedding night. The doomed Allan – whose extreme youth is encapsulated in the description of him as 'The Grey boy' – is a lost soul sacrificed on the altar of social bigotry. When Blanche discovers Allan with another man, it utterly destroys her happiness. All three of them then take off for the Moon Lake Casino on a manic drinking spree in a tragic attempt to pretend 'that nothing had been discovered'. Eventually, unable to stop herself, Blanche blurts out to Allan her feelings about his homosexuality; 'on the dance-floor – unable to stop myself – I'd suddenly said – "I know! I know! You disgust me ..."'. Knowing that the secret he has tried so hard to conceal has been finally exposed, Allan runs outside and shoots himself by the lake. Blanche's memory of this event is so stark that she can recall the precise words spoken by the horrified onlookers who gathered by the body when she tells the story to Mitch in Scene VI.

Shep Huntleigh

Shep is another character present only in Blanche's memory. A former beau of hers, he comes to represent her last hope of escaping her past. Apparently an oil millionaire from Dallas, Texas, Blanche claims to have worn his 'ATO pin' when they were courting, which was a sign of 'going steady'. The character's name is also interesting. At the end of the play Blanche confuses the doctor who has come to take her to the asylum with her former beau. This seems highly significant given that the doctor can be seen as both a good 'shepherd' who guides and supports her and as a sinister 'hunter' who captures and entraps her.

Context

Shep's 'ATO pin' shows his affiliation to the Alpha Tau Omega college fraternity, founded in Virginia at the end of the Civil War in 1865. The brotherhood's aim was to unify the divided North and South in the aftermath of the conflict that had split the nation. Shep's membership of this elite aristocratic society is an index of his status as an old-school Southern gentleman and positions him as Stanley's social and cultural opposite number.

A Young Man

The Young Man comes to the Kowalskis' apartment when Blanche is waiting at home for Mitch to collect her for their date. Blanche is attracted to him and kisses him. On the one hand, he is an uneasy reminder of that obsession with very young men which resulted in Blanche being fired from her teaching post; on the other, he evokes the ghost of her tragic husband Allan Grey.

A Negro Woman

Another character who reveals the multicultural nature of the Vieux Carré, the Negro Woman appears in the first scene of the play, chatting to Eunice. She is amused by Stanley's unmistakable sexual posturing and when Blanche arrives she offers to fetch Stella from the bowling alley. In Scene X, just before Stanley rapes Blanche, she is seen outside the Kowalskis' apartment, rifling through a prostitute's stolen handbag.

A Mexican Woman

The blind Mexican Woman, who sells traditional funeral decorations, alarms Blanche with her eerie cry of '*Flores para los muertos*' – 'flowers for the dead'. She functions as a kind of **choric** figure, further heightening the play's links with classical tragedy.

choric resembling a chorus in drama or recitation.

Context

In classical Greek tragedy the chorus often represented ordinary people as opposed to the great heroes and gods who dominated the action on stage, expressing for the benefit of the audience those ideas and emotions the main characters were unable to voice, such as hidden fears or desires. It is possible to see both the Mexican Woman and the unseen but audible Tamale Vendor as fulfilling aspects of these functions in *Streetcar*.

A doctor and a nurse

When he arrives to take Blanche to the asylum the doctor refuses to have Blanche put into a straitjacket and leads her out of the Kowalskis' apartment by the arm in a rather courtly and gentlemanlike manner. In a final moment of immense pathos, it seems clear that Blanche has confused the doctor with her former beau, Shep Huntleigh. The nurse's harsh manner serves to highlight his much more sympathetic attitude.