

AQA English Literature A-level

Drama: A Streetcar Named Desire Context

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AO3: What does context mean for your exam?

Writing about **context** and **background information** is the third of your five assessment objectives. Across the two papers, it counts for approximately **24%** of the marks so is not to be overlooked. Examiners are looking for you to demonstrate an “**understanding** of the **significance** and **influence** of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received”, i.e. the **relationship between the ideas** in the text and the **context** in which it was written.

Context can be a variety of different factors, including:

- Details about the **author's background** and **life**.
- The **historical context** in which they lived and wrote, and (if it is different) the historical context in which the text is set. In *Streetcar Named Desire*, you could consider Williams' portrayal of **1940's gender roles**.
- How the text was **received** when it was first published or performed.
- **Literary contexts**, for example which **genre(s)** the author uses in the text. The contexts in which a text is engaged with by **different audiences** through the ages.
- **Performance history** (for a play), for example how it would have been first staged, and various different performances through to the present day.

Context is assessed **throughout the paper**. It is important that you have a thorough knowledge of a text's context in order to understand it fully.. It is important to understand what Williams' original audience would have known or been thinking about as they watched the play, as these are the people for whom he was writing. This will give you a **subtler understanding** of the text, and allow you to make sense of some of the references within it.

AO3 Tip

The most important thing to remember about context in your exam essay is that it needs to be directly relevant, rather than 'bolted-on' to the end of a paragraph or essay. You should include relevant context throughout to illustrate and develop your answer to the question. The examiner doesn't want to read everything you know about Tennessee Williams' father but would rather read about how his alcoholic father can be seen in Stanley!



Authorial Context: Tennessee Williams' life

William's life is important to note, as many of his characters were built around his **real-life** relationships. Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams III, in 1919, in Mississippi. In college he was named Tennessee by his friends, after his home state. Williams had a particularly **difficult childhood**; his parents had an unhappy marriage, his father was an **alcoholic** and his mother **resented** her husband's drunken and philandering ways. Cornelius Coffin Williams, Williams' father, was a domineering, **working-class salesman**, who is said to have been negligent of his parental duties and often missing from his children's lives. Meanwhile, Tennessee Williams' mother, Edwina Williams was a **Southern Belle**, born to a **higher class and well-read** Episcopal minister and an educated music teacher. Edwina detested her husband's drinking, extra-marital affairs, and general lifestyle, believing that they did not reflect well on her as she had a certain social status to maintain.

As a child, he was **bedridden** for two years and grew **reserved and vulnerable** after he was **ostracized** and **bullied** in school. However, he was very close to his sister Rose, who later suffered from mental illness and was **institutionalized** for the same. Williams was gay and lived in a time where homosexuality was seen as a mental illness, something that is reflected clearly in his work.

It is evident that **negative experiences fueled** much of William's writing. All the above life events and relationships are represented through the main characters in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Williams struggled with loneliness, alcoholism and depression, and depicted them in his work.

'Williams has repeatedly claimed, "I am Blanche DuBois" and has identified with her, particularly in terms of a shared hysteria. Also like Blanche, Williams had a tendency to lie. One example of this is Williams's and Blanche's shared propensity to mislead people concerning their age.'

Pagan, N. 1993. *Rethinking Literary Biography: A Postmodern Approach to Tennessee Williams.*



Socio-Political Context

The play is set in the atmospheric **aftermath** of the Civil War. The Civil War in America was fought between the Northern and Southern States, and this was mainly on the issue of the **abolishment** of Slavery. The Southern States were against its abolishments as their plantations were based on slavery. The war ended in 1865 at the end with the **Northern states' victory**. Despite the loss, the image of 'The South' remained in their minds. While slavery was no longer legal, **great importance** continued to be placed on ancestry and heritage, therefore the **racism** that existed all along continued to exist long after the Civil War.

This South was **alienated** from the rest of America and was known to be a place brimming with racism and poverty. While slavery was illegal, segregation was prevalent and this system perpetuated cheap labor based on race. However, amidst all this, after the Great Depression, New Orleans emerged as the **champion of diversity** and acceptance in these Southern States. With a large **influx of immigrants** from Europe and Africa, New Orleans became a **melting pot** of culture. This influx was spurred by the shift to an **industrial economy**, with multiple factories being set up to replace the old agrarian community. In tandem with this, the working class emerged.

'The clock in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is Stella's pregnancy ... It is no accident that the day the Kowalski baby – the postwar hybrid of Stanley and Stella – is born is also the day that the representative of the antebellum South, Blanche, is defeated, raped and destroyed. Williams casts something of a cold eye on the triumph of a new (postwar) South peopled by brutish and insensitive Stanley Kowalskis.'

Wertheim.A. 2004. 'Staging the War: American Drama and World War II'

Williams sets *A Streetcar Named Desire* in this "Deep South", yet we see two different sides to it. Mississippi and the old ways of **intolerance** towards difference and the "Other" are represented through the upper-class Dubois heritage, while New Orleans through Elysian Fields, showcases the **more liberal** South.

Socio-Economic Context

A Streetcar Named Desire explores a time of **transition** for the American South, and the tensions resulting from the shift from **old money** into **modernity** and **diversity**. Blanche and Stella's money would likely have been **built on slavery**, and Blanche represents the struggle of being stuck in the



past, unable to move on with a progressing society. Her tension with Stanley is caused by their clashing values, and many of the insults she hurls at him implying a sense of **brutishness** and **vulgarity** related to his status as a **working-class immigrant**.

The **changing** context of the **South** was part of a wider shift towards modernity during the twentieth century. Slavery having been abolished in the South in 1865, as a result of the **Civil War**, leading to the **decline** of families like the Dubois. America in the twentieth century becomes centered around the idea of the **American Dream**, and the welcoming of generations of immigrants, like Stanley, who feel intrinsically all-American. Stanley represents this dream, and the go-getting thrust of the working-class people who feel they can achieve whatever they desire through hard work, perseverance, and **individualism**. This promise is fundamentally at odds with everything that allows Blanche to live in her Southern belle fantasy. This individualistic, all-American ideology was heavily propelled by the events of the Second World War. Although Williams barely mentions the war, it is ever-present in his themes and characters. WW2 enabled a sense of American **heroism** to develop, a heroism that was based on overcoming the Great Depression and defeating the Nazis. A **national spotlight** was shone on **working-class men** like Stanley, who had survived the war, rejoined the peacetime workforce and were now seen as **bearers** of American hard-working **spirit**.

Socio-Cultural Context

"I have only one major theme for my work, which is the destructive power of society on the sensitive, non-conformist individual."

-Tennessee Williams

Gender Roles

A Streetcar Named Desire is often considered a play that **critiques the limitations** that the **post-world war American society imposed on itself**. While the restrictions on women are an explicit focus of Williams', the gender stereotyping that men suffer is also addressed implicitly.

The postwar emergence of a sense of American heroism had implications for the **championing of masculinity**, as the nation decided to embrace **values** centered around **family** and home, heroising these men and placing women like Stella in a more **domestic role** alongside them.



During WW2, the percentage of women in the national workforce rose from 27% to 37%. After the war ended, they were **pushed back into traditional domestic roles**. Williams' **post-war New Orleans, therefore**, is a space where **traditional** gender roles had been shaken up and conservative Southern ideals of old money and aristocratic heritage had been displaced in favour of the new working class work ethic. Williams **establishes** conventional gender stereotypes and yet **twists** the notions of masculine and feminine energy using characters. While Stella and Stanley more or less portray the accepted societal gender roles, Blanche showcases masculine energy in her sexuality and arrogance, while Mitch and Allan Grey are used to showcase sensitivity, a "feminine" trait. What is clear throughout the plot is **societal gender norms negatively impact** all the main characters in the play driving them towards either death, mental or moral destruction.

Race

"New Orleans is a cosmopolitan city where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races."

- *A Streetcar Named Desire*, stage directions, Scene One

The above stage directions are crucial to the play; 1940's America was **not free** of racial prejudice and discrimination. This **social context** is important to the setting because **Williams' New Orleans** becomes a pocket that is distinguished from the rest in its warmth and **welcoming attitude** towards the New American Dream of equality - a Dream open to all classes and races. Thus, **Blanche** is a stranger in New Orleans. She arrives there bringing with her her **traditional notions** of superiority.

While the main characters are all white, "Negro woman", "Mexican women", language, slang, dialects along with jazz music attempt to create the feeling of diversity and **Otherness**. The play does **not address the glaring racism** against African-Americans at that time. However, Williams looks at **racism faced** by **recent European immigrants** compared to longer established ones through the Kowalski - DuBois conflict.

The relationship between Blanche and Stanley illustrates the **prejudice** many first or second-generation European faced. Blanche refers to him as a "**polack**" (Scene Eight) and "**swine**" (Scene 10). These appellations, along with statements like "**You healthy Polack, without a nerve in your body**" (Scene Eight) reveal Blanche's racism or **xenophobia**. In late 19th-century and early 20th-century America, 'new immigrants' from Italy, Ireland, Poland, Greece, Hungary and the Slavic countries occupied a racial middle ground and were considered 'not-quite-white'. However, Stanley predominantly faces prejudice as a result of his class position, rather than his ethnic Otherness or ambiguity. This is important to note when discussing the play as a commentary



on racism, as at the time, racism in America pertaining to skin color was predominant. Thus, *A Streetcar Named Desire* successfully addresses **prejudice based on class rather than race**, particularly in a post-Harlem Renaissance era where segregation was still prevalent but being contested.

Religion and Morality

America was founded on **Puritan and other Christian** principles. These principles seeped into **culture** and beliefs, and evolved over time. While the play does not explicitly discuss religion, the prejudice against homosexuality and ideas about sexual immorality stem from the Christian principles that America was built on. The idea that a “wife must submit to her husband” is a **biblical principle** as well, and something advocated in **twentieth-century America**, particularly in the Southern states. **America, post-Depression and post-war, desperately** tried to revert to “old-fashioned values” drawn from Christian principles.

While Williams does not explicitly address religion, he does address the **issue of morality** as understood by the American society. Blanche is seen struggling with the moral standards that are **thrust on her by society**. She seems to pacify herself even though she is aware of her deceit, convincing herself that she never “**lied in [her] heart**” (Scene Nine) and was never “**deliberate[ly] cruel**” (Scene 10). The play can be understood as a **critique of conventional notions of morality** as sexual standards are **double standards - they fall more heavily on women**. Multiple lovers leave Blanche labelled and **ostracised** and **feeling defiled** (which she tries to cope with through bathing), while Stanley gets away with domestic abuse and rape.

“Bert Cardullo sees *Streetcar*, then, as a Christian tragedy, the impetus of Blanche’s destruction coming not from Stanley nor from her denial of her husband’s homosexuality, but from his suicide, which she feels was the result of her denial.”

- Jac Tharpe, *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute*.

Literary and Critical Context

The play received a variety of responses when it first hit Broadway. Some rejected **the bold portrayal** of sexuality, morality, and desire, but it also became very popular amongst those audiences who felt the **crude realism was admirable**. Robert J. Leeney, the editorial writer of the



Register, called Williams an “**ultra-realist**” who was **blunt in his ideas** and did not overlook basic human needs behaviour. Many critics constantly compared his play to his *The Glass Menagerie*, but **unlike** *The Glass Menagerie* it was **deemed far graver**.

Some critics and audiences looked at **Stanley as a victim** of Blanche’s madness and attack against his masculinity, class, and heritage. The rape scene in this approach is **justified as an event initiated by Blanche through her flirting and exhibitionism**. It was reported that some audiences actively **cheered** during Blanche’s rape. To understand this further, we look at the literary lenses through which the play can be understood. Through a **Marxist lens**, we see Stanley as the **reigning champion of the working classes**. He defeats the old aristocratic ways by removing Blanche, the symbol of the Bourgeois, from their lives and moves on to live with his wife and newborn son, the symbol of his future. This can be furthered using the Darwinian ‘survival of the fittest’— Stanley, **‘the gaudy seed bearer’**, as Williams calls him (Scene One), emerges the survivor at the end ready to **pass his way of life down** to his new-born child as he defeats the final remnants of the **Bourgeois threat to his life—Blanche**. Albert Wertheim, professor and author considers the baby as a **representation of a Kowalski future** and not a DuBois one; Blanche is removed from the picture while Stanley stays back— his final win.

This is in direct **contrast** to understanding the play from a **feminist lens**. The play, when viewed from a feminist lens, is a critique of the expectations of patriarchal society, which is expressed through the psychological unravelling of characters. Williams’ twisted portrayal of masculinity and femininity can be seen in this light as well, particularly using Blanche who tends to show masculine energy which in turn becomes a threat to Stanley, the established Alpha male and Patriarch.

The rape of Blanche through this feminist lens becomes a scene where Stanley **asserts his masculine power and authority over Blanche through sexual violence**. He uses her past decisions against her, a past that is unacceptable because she is a woman. This entire event, in feminist discourse, portrays women as victims of the oppressive patriarchy. The patriarchy and its norms **recurrently chipped at Blanche’s sanity** as she felt she needed to find a husband to be accepted by society.

“As we cannot fully accept or reject Blanche, when she is eliminated we don’t fully sympathize nor do we rejoice fully”

- Klara Bodis, “Blanche: A Complexity of Attitudes”



Production History

Williams published *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947, in the aftermath of the Second World War. *A Streetcar Named Desire* became so popular because of the **taboo themes** of class tensions, female sexuality, homosexuality, and male domination— all of which simultaneously **coexisted** with the **social dilemmas** of the time. Post-war (civil and world wars) America was a **fragmented and evolving nation** in many ways, and Tennessee Williams critically explores the social tensions and **psychological subdivisions** of class structures and gender roles through the **clash of characters**.

Commentary on Marlon Brando's portrayal of Stanley:

'John Gronsbeck-Tedesco notes that [Brando's] poses and gestures copied the confident, coiled, often bare-chested images of American soldiers during the war... As either a violent soldier or a desperate hedonist, Brando/Kowalski is an empty shell, held together by kinaesthetic body language learned in the military or in the consumption of goods. This presence needs constant sensation to starve off depression.'

McConachie.B.A. 2005. 'American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War.'

Many viewed the play as exposing the moral decay of **'Old South[ern]' values** of rigid social hierarchy, aristocracy, culture, and etiquette versus the **'New South[ern]' values** that embodied a Darwinian, **survival-of-the-fittest** struggle of the American Dream. At the time of the **first performance** in 1974, common knowledge, social norms and the audience reception would have looked extremely different. At this time, **Stanley** in many ways **symbolised** the world of **masculinity** and **fierce individualism**. Many observed women's **unjust subservience** and suffering, and these were **contested** by a burgeoning **feminist movement**.

On December 3rd, 1947, Broadway staged *A Streetcar Named Desire* for the first time. The performance ended with a short, surprised **silence** before a **thunder of applause, lasting 30 minutes**, broke out. With over 800 performances across America, Marlon Brando was a star overnight while Williams won a **Pulitzer for Drama** and Jessica Tandy (the actress who played Blanche) won a Tony award.

In 1951, the same director Elia Kazan turned the play into a movie, under Williams' screenwriting. There was much **controversy** over the rape scene and Williams' stood his ground refusing to remove it. As a result, in the movie, dictated by the Catholic Legion of Decency, Stanley is punished on-screen as Stella leaves him.



Comment on the censorship edits in the film:

'Among the most significant were eliminating any reference to homosexuality, getting rid of, or considerably weakening, the rape, outlawing any erotic behaviour in either Blanche's conduct (nymphomania) or Stanley's lovemaking with his wife, and punishing Stanley for raping Blanche by having Stella leave him.'

Kolin.P.C. 2000. 'Williams: A Streetcar Named Desire.'

Performance is also given much importance in criticism, Susan Spector, in her essay "Alternative Visions of Blanche DuBois", discusses how Blanche under **Kazan's direction** was an image of a redundant **dying culture** and left audiences **accepting Stanley's aggressions**, while **Clurman's** Blanche left Blanche as a victim of **Stanley's vicious patriarchy**. Spector believed that **the script was compliant** and left actors and directors with the power to construct and **influence interpretation**.

"Hagen's Blanche under Clurman's direction left audiences feeling they had watched a delicate woman driven insane by a brutish environment epitomized by Stanley Kowalski. Tandy's Blanche under Kazan's direction left audiences feeling that a madwoman had entered an alien world and after shaking that world had been successfully exorcised."

- Susan Spector's "Alternative Visions of Blanche DuBois"

The Theatre Production

Williams uses eleven **scenes rather than acts**, to unfold his story, with and **does not indicate any break** for an interval. There have been **speculations** about his reasons for doing this. He may have chosen this unconventional structure because he felt that his particular **talent was for writing short, one-act plays**, and that he could not sustain dramatic tension for three acts of conventional length - a tension that is **enhanced** by the **lack of an interval**. **Language** and **dialogue** are key to characterisation, clearly depicting **differences in upbringing and class**. Even in stage directions, he uses rich imagery to detail the characterisation. Staging and directions carry *A Streetcar Named Desire* as a play. Williams uses a **mixed approach** of **expressionism in the portrayal of reality**. Expressionism can be understood as the representation of reality in an **abstract** form.



“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...”

- Tennessee Williams

Williams uses stage directions to give very **specific instructions** on sounds, symbols, sets, and the props. For example, he recurrently uses **stage directions** to establish Elysian Fields as **multicultural** and vibrant. The setting of the Kowalski apartment and the street outside is designed and **movements between the two spaces are seamless**, the life of the street seeping into the apartment. For example, the Mexican flower vendor from the streets is a symbol of death adding to Blanche's mental breakdown. Another example is the rape that occurs within the apartment as the prostitute and drunkard on the street argue. This concurrence of events intensifies the audience's sense of the harsh reality of life in Elysian Fields. The boundaries between the public and private are **distorted** here, which connects to the larger **theme** of society's control on individuality.

Williams also uses **costumes and props** to add to symbols, **thematic concerns**, and characterisation —be it Blanche's, paper lantern, tattered faux furs, and cheap jewelry to reflect her false glamour, or the use of denim to indicate working classness. Williams' use of **lighting** is also detailed and symbolic as he contrasts light with darkness. Shades of light and darkness mirror and enhance the mood of the scene but also aids with **characterization**, particularly with Blanche and her affinity for darkness.

Williams also uses music as a **theatrical device**, modernist music and jazz is used to create the setting. The Varsouviana Polka reflects Blanche's guilt-induced mental deterioration. This song plays a vital role in her characterization and transports the audience **seamlessly into her delusions and then back to reality**—the use of loud noises is also evident in creating the contrasting reality. Additionally, jungle noises are used to reflect the brutal, primal events of the play, mainly surrounding Stanley.

Williams' creative use of every aspect in theatre production i.e music, sets, props, costumes, etc., is what marks him as one of the greatest playwrights in history.

The Film

Williams' wrote the screenplay for the film adaptation of the drama, and in his version, theme themes and dialogues predominantly **remained the same**. Most changes were the result of **censorship**; so while many important segments were **filmed** and edited in, they were cut at prior



to release and most were made **without the knowledge** of the director and writer, much to their discontent. The **Hollywood Production Code** and the **National Legion of Decency** played the key role in censorship, cutting out segments they deemed “inappropriate for viewing”. There are **two versions** of the film, the first 1951 version saw maximum censorship, while the 1993 version saw more of the original script and filming.

Here are some segments and dialogues that were removed or changed:

Conversations and plot events about homosexuality	Homosexuality was deemed as not a “ correct standard of life ” and so it was changed. In the movie, Allan Grey was called “ weak ” by Blanche who “ lost respect for him ” because he could retain any job he attempted. This is what leads him to shoot himself.
Blanche’s drunkenness or flirtations (Mitch and young man)	Inappropriate behaviour for women.
Any verbal abuse toward Stanley about his immigrant status or sub-human nature-	Deemed as discrimiantion
Stella’s defense of Stanley’s abuse	Deemed as immoral and inappropriate behaviour (this was readded in the second version of the movie)
Stella and Stanley’s intimate conversations	Deemed as inappropriate for viewing
“ intimacies with strangers [were] all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with ” (Scene Nine)	Intimacies was changed to “ meetings ”
“ On Sunday nights they would go in town to get drunk – ” (Scene Nine)	Sunday was changed to Saturday, as drinking on a holy day or the Sabbath day was frowned upon .
“ is sinful, then let me be damned for it! ” (Scene Nine)	Damned is changed to “ punished ”, Words like “ hell ” and “ damn ” were removed from the entire film.



“When *A Streetcar Named Desire* was first released, it created a firestorm of controversy. It was immoral, decadent, vulgar and sinful, its critics cried. And that was after substantial cuts had already been made in the picture, at the insistence of Warner Bros., driven on by the industry's own censors. Elia Kazan, who directed the film, fought the cuts and lost. For years the missing footage - only about five minutes in length, but crucial - was thought lost. But this 1993 restoration splices together Kazan's original cut, and we can see how daring the film really was”.

- Roger Ebert (film critic)

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