

AQA English Literature A-level

Drama: A Streetcar Named Desire Overview

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A Streetcar Named Desire is a play written by **Tennessee Williams**, first performed in 1947, and set in the **post-war** American South. It centres around the encounter between two sisters who have followed different paths, with schoolteacher Blanche still holding onto her **Southern Belle** upbringing; and Stella having moved to **New Orleans** and married Stanley, a Polish auto-parts supply man. The play explores a changing time in **American society** through a family encounter within the intimate setting of Stella and Stanley's New Orleans apartment. It explores the roles of gender, sexuality, desire, illusion, delusion, social class and status within this context.

Synopsis

The play begins with Blanche's arrival in New Orleans, having ridden a streetcar to Stella's home. The **tension** between their **upbringing** and Stella's **current lifestyle** is made explicit from the beginning through Blanche's critique of the place. Blanche's discomfort in this setting and general distress is clear as Blanche tells Stella that she has lost their old home, Belle Reve. There's a sense of **ambiguity** around what actually happened to the house, which echoes Blanche's wider ambiguous attitude to talking about herself and her past. She tells Stella that she had to take a break from her teaching position due to her nerves. Stanley's blunt, **confrontational** nature is then established when he questions Blanche about her past, leaving her visually and physically uncomfortable by forcing her to confront memories of her dead husband.

When Stanley holds a poker night, Blanche is introduced to Mitch, one of Stanley's friends. Blanche sees a kindness and **sensitivity** in Mitch which she believes sets him apart from the other men, and, as he expresses affection for her, he soon becomes a vessel of **hope** in Blanche's eyes. Their first conversation is interrupted by Stanley erupting into the space in a **drunken rage**, which results in him **physically** hurting Stella. Blanche and Stella **escape** to Eunice's apartment, and Stanley eventually cries out for Stella in the street, leading to Stella's **forgiveness** of his violence. The two embrace, something which Blanche, shaken by the encounter, cannot understand.

Over the following weeks, the tension between Blanche and Stanley, who act as representations of **opposing binary** ideals, grows. Stanley increasingly tries to turn Stella against Blanche, accusing Blanche of having a **suspicious** past, and suspicious intentions with her visit. Blanche opens up to Stella about needing Mitch. Blanche and Mitch continue to develop a relationship. They go on a date where she opens up to him about **her past**, telling him that she was married to a young boy, who had a softness and sensitivity unlike other men she knew. After discovering him having an affair with another man, the three of them had gone to a casino together, and at the end of the night Blanche's husband had shot himself. Mitch **supports** her, telling her they need each other.

On Blanche's birthday, Stanley is convinced he has discovered the **truth** about Blanche. He tells Stella that the supply-man at the plant knows about her past in Laurel. He accuses her of **sexual promiscuity** and of having had an affair with one of her students, claiming she had moved into a hotel. Eventually she was **forced to leave** town due to her lifestyle. Stanley tries to force Blanche to leave, telling Stella that he doesn't want Mitch to be involved with her. Stanley then tries to **confront** Blanche with a ticket back to Laurel, making her physically sick. Stella's angry, but Stanley continues to try to get close to her,



consistently trying to remind her of their relationship before Blanche came. Stella goes into labour, and Stanley drives her to the hospital.

Mitch, who Blanche had been expecting earlier, arrives at the house and begins confronting Blanche about her past. She tries to explain that after her husband's death she **pursued intimacy** with strangers in order to feel love and meaning. However, he continues to accuse her of **lying** to him and tries to approach her sexually, saying he no longer wants to marry her. She manages to get him to leave by screaming "Fire", and goes back to **drinking** until Stanley gets home later. Stella is at the hospital for the night, leaving Blanche feeling **frightened** and **uncomfortable** to be with Stanley. He confronts her about her past, **accusing** her of being a liar. The situation escalates until he **rapes** her.

The play ends with Blanche being taken away to a **mental institution** a few weeks later, with Stella **refusing to believe** that Stanley raped her, being convinced it's the help she needs. Blanche is frightened and confused, having been expecting to be taken away by an old boyfriend. She tries to physically fight her way out, but is eventually convinced by the doctor's **kindness**, and follows him willingly. Stella cries after Blanche, and Stanley embraces her.

Main characters

Blanche Dubois

Stella's **older** sister, a **schoolteacher** born and raised in **Laurel, Mississippi**. She clings onto her family home and everything her upbringing stands for. Having endured **emotional trauma**, Blanche's character is marked by a sensitive personification of the idea of **clinging** on to the past and living in a **fantasy**. She is unable to progress with the American South. Blanche is visually associated with **traditional notions** of femininity and delicacy, often dressed in white and obsessed with maintaining an **illusion** of ageless beauty. The unrealistic pressures Blanche has been conditioned to put on herself are linked to her **deteriorating** mental state as the play's men continue to put conflicting expectations on her. She is accused of being a liar due to her fantasy and illusion, but her true past and sexual promiscuity is **condemned** as vulgar; the **shame** surrounding her sexuality perpetuates her mental demise. Blanche's ex husband, **Allan Grey**, is also worth noting as a character representing societal taboos surrounding homosexuality. His sexuality is linked to a poetic sensitivity similar to Blanche's, crushed out by the world to the point of suicide.

Stella Kowalski

Blanche's **younger** sister, Stella, comes from the same **aristocratic** Southern upbringing, but **left** Mississippi at a **young** age and decided to **embrace** the **changing times** in New Orleans. Stella is a **mild, kind** character who spends the majority of the play **torn** between her love for Stanley and Blanche. Her affection for Stanley clearly stems from a deep inner connection, and allows her to explore her own primal sexual nature within the **confines** of societal expectations for women. The two make consistent references to coming from wildly different worlds, but finding a mutual connection regardless. Her **tolerance** for Stanley's violence and eventual dismissal of Blanche's rape story shows a similarity to Blanche's attitude of **delusion** that Stella herself may not realise.



Stanley Kowalski

Stanley is Stella's **husband** and stands as the **personification** of pure force, hard work, and **blunt realism**. Stanley is a **working class immigrant**, having just returned home from the war, epitomising the ideal of the **American Dream** in the mid 20th century. He sees himself as an equaliser, and aims to crush out Blanche's old fashioned pretensions. However, his individualism easily turns to brutish force and aggression as his **primal, sexual** love for Stella into **physical violence**. Additionally, his hatred for Blanche is expressed as rape. He is an exploration of our glorification of the American **family man**, portraying the seedy underside to this form of **masculine perseverance** and achievement.

Harold "Mitch" Mitchell

Stanley's friend who Blanche takes romantic interest in, Mitch is introduced as a kinder, more **sensitive** version of the all-American **working class** man. His social status is similar to Stanley's, having fought in the war and returned to the workforce. His **clumsy**, lowly nature contrasts heavily with Blanche's poetic fantasy of a gentleman. However, his attitude differs from Stanley; Blanche is initially attracted to him because she sees him as softer, more gentlemanly than the other men. This is due to his commitment to taking care of his ill mother, meaning that he doesn't possess the same kind of **go-getter individualism** as Stanley. Their moments of intimacy emphasise this side of Mitch. He is understanding and patient with her. This comes to an **abrupt halt** when he learns of her sexual **past from Stanley**, and turns against her, frightening her with sexual advances and making her feel like he is **owed something** for this gentility.

Side Characters

Side characters include **Eunice**, an upstairs neighbour who shelters and advises Stella when needed. There are also **Stanley's poker buddies** (one of them Eunice's husband **Steve**), who function largely to create the sense of a mass of masculine energy. Lastly, there are several unnamed passerbys including **a black woman, a mexican woman, a young collector, a nurse and a doctor**.

Themes

The Tension Between Femininity and Masculinity

Femininity and masculinity are explored in **visual** and **material** terms, through a sense of **sensitivity** as it clashes with blunt **primalism** and **aggression**. Blanche and Stanley represent this **binary** approach to **gender**,

The two main characters, Stanley and Blanche, are pitted against each other in a Darwinian struggle of the sexes throughout the play, with **hegemonic masculinity** eventually crushing the feminine.



Social Class

The tension between the Dubois family's **aristocratic**, old money status and Stanley and Mitch's **working class** backgrounds is central throughout the play. This is the root of many of Blanche and Stanley's **conflicts**. Stanley is proud of his achievement of the **American Dream** and his hatred for Blanche is fuelled by the fact that she will always dismiss him, and treat him as "**common**" due to her pretensions. She represents a side of society that **refuses** to accept **social mobility**.

Sexual Desire

Sexual desire is represented most pointedly as **primal**, unavoidable, and somewhat **dark**. There's a fundamental **inequality** to the way that Williams sees desire; some are allowed it, and some aren't. For instance, whereas Stanley and Stella are **free** to explore their sexuality as a **married** couple, characters like Blanche and Allan Grey face such great **judgement** from **society** regarding their desire that it shakes them to their core, deeply impacting their **mental health**. In both instances, however, desire is inherently **dangerous** - be it the **fine line** between Stanley's sexual desire and **physical aggression** or Allan's death due to his internalised fear of his sexuality.

Secrecy, Fantasy and Delusion

Blanche is a character who has come to **cope through fantasy**. By creating a sense of magic around her, she holds onto the **illusion** of beauty. This is associated with her southern belle persona, as she tries to **escape** from her past. The line between fantasy and delusion is constantly being explored through her deteriorating mental state, **flashbacks**, and eventual **confinement** to a mental institution. Stanley's blunt, often aggressive **realism** is used as a **foil** for this, especially through his consistent accusations towards Blanche being a liar.

The American Dream/ Old vs New South

Blanche and Stella are the only surviving members of their family. As their family home is lost, they represent the **last traces of bourgeois** old Southern ideals. Blanche's fading beauty echoes the fading away of the illusionary beauty of this time; the **appearance** of timeless, **ethereal glamour** built on the backs of slaves. Williams uses her character to come to grips with the fundamental **imperfections** of these ideals. He highlights the glossy mask, the air of fantasy that was used to uphold their glorification. As time passes, and Blanche's upbringing slips away, these ideals are **replaced** by the **individualistic hard work** of the **American dream**. Stella is able to adapt to this, while Blanche remains stuck.

Key Symbols and Motifs

Light and Shadow

Where stark **light** represents the **revelation of truth**, **shadows** represent Blanche's **illusions**, emphasising **obscurity** she surrounds herself with to **cope** with her fear of her



reality. This is probably one of the most heavily used symbols in the entire play - we consistently see Blanche inching away from stark daylight, afraid that people will see her true appearance. Harsh light has a blunt aggression about it that is enough to overwhelm her sensitive mind. This also extends into the symbol of the **paper lantern**, which Mitch eventually rips off of the lightbulb to reveal Blanche's true nature.

Bathing and Cleanliness

Blanche's obsession with bathing shows us her need to **purify herself** from her past, and is another way in which she **escapes** from her **reality**. In particular, Williams depicts this through the apartment, which she consistently refers to as overly hot and stuffy. This motif gains significance throughout the play, as **cleanliness** becomes increasingly associated with **purity** and **virginity**. This is especially apparent when Mitch finds out about Blanche's **promiscuous** past and regards her as too unclean to bring into his family home. Blanche is constantly trying to cleanse herself of the '**dirty**' elements of her past and become the **epitome** of perfect, **traditional femininity**.

Alcohol

Alcohol is an important **instigator** of action throughout the play as it is heavily linked to both Blanche and Stanley. For Blanche, it is mainly just another form of **escape**. One of the key things to note about Blanche's drinking is her **dismissal** of it, constantly trying to brush it off and cover it up. In relation to Stanley, alcohol becomes a **catalyst** for his **violence** and aggression.

Assessment Objectives

AO4 and AO5:

Williams' own dad's was a heavy alcohol drinker and Stanley is said to be based on this "domineering" man..

The Polka

The polka was playing the night of Blanche's **husband's suicide**, which comes on every time that Blanche is descending into a **traumatic flashback**. When we see Blanche suddenly becoming aware of her true reality and her past, the polka starts playing until something suddenly stops it, such as a **gunshot**, the end of the scene, or a **distraction**.

Assessment Objectives

AO2 and AO3:

Williams adds this motif so that the audience comes to an understanding that, when the polka is playing, what they are seeing can no longer be trusted - they are transported into Blanche's head, witnessing her struggles from within.



White and Bright Colours

Williams is very **visual** with his **characterisation**. The association of Blanche with **white**, and of Stanley with **bold** colours, is just a visual representation of what we know about their characters. White associates Blanche with a very ethereal, traditional **feminine** beauty, and Stanley with bold, uncompromising **masculinity**. However, it is also important to note that white is the colour of virginity, cleanliness and purity. This is something Blanche aims for as she tries to repress and cleanse herself of her promiscuous past.

Social and Political Context

The play explores a time of **transition** for the American South, exploring the tensions involved in a move away from the high time of **old money** into **modernity** and **diversity**. Blanche and Stella's money would likely have been **built on slavery**. Blanche as a character represents the struggle of being stuck in the past, unable to keep up with a rapidly changing society. Her tension with Stanley is therefore often represented in these terms, with many of the insults she hurls at him implying a sense of **brutishness** and **vulgarity** related to his status as an **immigrant of working class** status.

The **changing** context of the **South** is part of a wider shift towards modernity during the twentieth century, with slavery having been abolished in the South in 1865 as a result of the **Civil War**. This led to the **decline** of families like the Dubois. America in the twentieth century becomes centred around the idea of the **American Dream**. This involved the welcoming of immigrants like Stanley, who feels he is intrinsically all-American. Stanley represents this dream, as well as the go-getting thrust of immigrants and working class people. They often felt like they could achieve what 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 accentuated after World War Two. Although Williams hardly mentions the war, this period was defined by a sense of American **heroism** pinned on surviving the great Depression and having defeated the Nazis. This resulted in a **national spotlight** on **working class men** who, like Stanley, had survived the war, returned to the workforce, and were now seen as **bearers** of American hard **working spirit**. This also has implications for the **championing of masculinity**. This is because the nation decides to embrace **values** centred around **family** and home, heroising these men while placing women like Stella in a more **domestic role** alongside them. However, there's a **strong conflict** there, as the focus on traditional family values is disputed by the number of women who had joined the workforce in the **absence of men**, who were now being **shoved back into a traditional role**. Williams' **post-war New Orleans** therefore encapsulates a space being faced with the **questioning** of **traditional** gender roles and the collapse of conservative Southern ideals.



Assessment Objectives

AO4 and AO5:

Williams described the Mississippi he was raised in as “a dark, wide, open world- in many ways, a world that no longer exists”- he has a strong relationship to the South and experiences its changing nature in all its ambiguity, finding himself, in many ways, like his characters, unable to progress, having been raised in accordance with conservative Southern values despite always having been at odds with them.

It's important to keep in mind the context of **Williams' own life**, and where he sits in relation to these shifts. Williams was born and raised in the South. His **father** was a traveling **salesman** who adhered heavily to masculinist American ideals. He was also an **alcoholic**. Mental illness was a predominant part of his family life, as his mother was prone to **hysterical attacks**. He himself had experienced a nervous breakdown, while his sister **Rose** was sent to a mental institution and lobotomised. Williams was also a practicing homosexual at a time when it was still illegal. This was made more difficult at home, where his father ridiculed his sensitivity and femininity his entire life. Williams therefore has a strong relationship to the idea of **softness** being crushed out by **masculine aggression**.

Genre and Structure

Streetcar is a **play**, which means that the story is therefore told exclusively through **dialogue** and Williams' **stage directions**. These tend to be lengthy. Williams heavily uses **Plastic Theatre** as a way to translate the sentiment, tone, and symbolism of the scene to the audience. Plastic Theatre is the use of props, sound and staging to express abstract ideas. It relies upon the **visual explanation** of concepts to the audience, so that, through theatrics, Williams is able to express the straddling of the line between fantasy, delusion, and reality. This kind of experimentation is important to Williams' exploration of the boundary between interiority and exteriority, as he uses it to illustrate the tensions between **Blanche's interior mindset and exterior sense of identity**. For instance, Blanche's love of dressing up in traditionally feminine, often white, attire illustrates the identity she clings on to, whereas when she declines into traumatic flashbacks the use of music and confused dialogue shows us how violently confused her mental state actually is. This leaves the audience perplexed, because the boundaries between reality and fantasy are blurred.

Williams also draws **thematic parallels** with the set itself. This is evident in the way that he visualises the boundary between the domestic space and the street. Similarly, this is extended into the idea of privacy, and by extent secrecy, as precarious. The play is generally said to fit into the **Southern Gothic** genre, which is marked by an awareness of being part of a decaying society as expressed through supernatural, dark imagery. This fantasy element also puts the play in the category of **Magical Realism**, in the ways that reality and imagination become confused into a linear narrative. However, it's also important to mark the play's association with **Social Realism**, due to its forthcoming exploration of themes of class, immigration and gender.



The play is structurally broken up into **eleven scenes**, each one coming to a sort of **mini-climax**, spanning about five months, with the climax of the play as a whole occurring in scene 10, when Stanley rapes Blanche, marking the point of no return for her deteriorating psychological state.

Glossary

- **Binary opposites:** The theory of Binary Oppositions is the ideology where concepts that are strictly defined and exist as opposites to the other. Examples: Left and right or black and white.
- **Realism:** Realism is defined as representation of an event, person or thing that is accurate or close to its existence in real life.
- **Social Mobility:** Social Mobility is the movement of people and households up and down the social strata or classes.
- **Social Realism:** Social realism is the representation of real socio-political conditions of the working class in the arts to criticize the prevalent power structures behind the conditions.
- **Magical Realism:** Magic realism is a type of device or style in fiction that depicts a realistic view of the world but also has some magical elements, which can lead to the blurring of the lines between fantasy and reality.
- **Southern Gothic:** Southern Gothic is a sub-genre of literature. It is gothic literature that takes place in the American South and categorized inclusive of grotesque characters, horrific deeds, desire and impulses.
- **American Dream:** A national ethos of the USA, the American Dream is an ideology that propagates freedom and opportunity for prosperity and success to all.

