



# Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Tennessee Williams's

## **A Streetcar Named Desire**

from

**Multiple Critical Perspectives™**

Edited by

Douglas Grudzina



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### A Message to the Teacher of Literature

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**O**PEN YOUR STUDENTS' EYES AND MINDS with this new, exciting approach to teaching literature.

In this guide, you will find reproducible activities, as well as clear and concise explanations of three contemporary critical perspectives—feel free to reproduce as much, or as little, of the material for your students' notebooks. You will also find specific suggestions to help you examine this familiar title in new and exciting ways. Your students will seize the opportunity to discuss, present orally, and write about their new insights.

What you will not find is an answer key. To the feminist, the feminist approach is the correct approach, just as the Freudian will hold to the Freudian. Truly, the point of this guide is to examine, question, and consider, not merely arrive at “right” answers.

You will also find this to be a versatile guide. Use it in concert with our *Teaching Unit* or our *Advanced Placement Teaching Unit*. Use it along with our *Response Journal*, or use it as your entire study of this title. However you choose to use it, we are confident you'll be thrilled with the new life you find in an old title, as well as in your students.



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## General Introduction to the Work

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### Introduction to *A Streetcar Named Desire*

OPENING ON DEC. 3, 1947, *A Streetcar Named Desire* secured Tennessee Williams's place in the pantheon of American playwrights. With its raw depiction of alcoholism, sexuality—including an offstage rape—and explosive human emotion, the play shocked and thrilled critics and audiences alike. The drama won for Williams the first of his two Pulitzer Prizes.

Set in New Orleans, where Williams lived for a time, *A Streetcar Named Desire* tells the story of the colossal and ultimately disastrous culture clash between Blanche DuBois, a fragile aging Southern belle, prone to drink and mendacity, and Stanley Kowalski, her brutally masculine, blue-collar brother-in-law. Stella Kowalski, sister to Blanche and wife to Stanley, forms the third point of this human Bermuda triangle.

Elia Kazan, an award-winner producer and director of both films and stage play, and a successful playwright and novelist, directed the Broadway production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as well as the 1951 film version. The drama introduced audiences to the raw power of a 23-year-old actor named Marlon Brando and starred a young Jessica Tandy in the stage production.

In later years, Williams confirmed that when he wrote the play, he intended for Blanche to be the more sympathetic character, a relic of the South's past, destroyed by the barbaric Stanley. However, audiences thrilled to Brando, whose performance overpowered his costars. According to an Internet Movie Database biography of Brando, Kazan feared the audience was becoming too enamored of Brando and suggested toning down the part, lest the actor's power undermine the audience's sympathy for Blanche. Williams, who also was enthralled with Brando, was not worried and permitted the actor to exercise his full range of power.

As with many of Williams's works, *A Streetcar Named Desire* contains overt and subtle autobiographical elements. Williams, who was openly homosexual, struggled for much of his life with alcoholism and depression, much like his protagonist, Blanche.

The movie garnered twelve Academy Award nominations and won four Oscars for best actress (Vivian Leigh), best supporting actress (Kim Hunter), best supporting actor (Karl Malden) and best art direction. Ironically, Brando, who remains the actor most identified with *Streetcar*, and director Kazan, the person most responsible for bringing Williams's work to life, were nominated for Oscars but did not win.



## Genre

*A Streetcar Named Desire* is a one-act play with eleven scenes. The work is a tragedy, a serious drama in which the problems and flaws of the central characters lead to an unhappy or catastrophic ending. The original Greek word *tragoidia* roughly means “the song of the goat,” from *tragos* (goat) and *oide* (ode or song). The structure of the classic dramatic tragedy, as outlined by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, is unified by place, time, and plot. In other words, the story is set in a single location, within a discrete time period, and is built around a series of actions that pertain to a single, central plot. In a classic tragedy, the story is told in a straightforward, chronological fashion, as the rising action builds toward a crisis and then the climax. The falling action is often brief, resulting in a swift *denouement* (outcome or final solution.) In the case of a tragedy, the unhappy resolution is known as the *catastrophe*.

*A Streetcar Named Desire* fits the standard parameters of a dramatic tragedy. The Kowalski apartment, where all the onstage action occurs, provides the unity of place. The story develops chronologically over the course of a few months, creating the unity of time. Facts about Blanche’s past are revealed through dialogue, rather than flashbacks, and serve to develop and explain the forward-moving plot. There is only one plot—the conflict between Blanche and Stanley. Stella and Mitch serve to complicate and enhance that plot, but they do not have storylines of their own. Likewise, the minor characters, Eunice and Steve Hubbell, are not central to any subplot; their squabbles merely echo the front-and-center fights between Stanley and Stella.

In a classic tragedy, the tragic hero meets with an unhappy end—usually his or her utter destruction, brought about by a combination of outside forces and his or her own fatal flaws. In *Streetcar*, Blanche is this tragic hero. Her past is a mixed bag. She has apparently sacrificed some part of her own happiness in order to tend to her dying relatives in Laurel, Mississippi, and witnessed the loss of the family home—a loss that she was powerless to stop. At the same time, she herself callously and thoughtlessly destroyed a sensitive soul and has spent her life since that defining event engaging in morally questionable behavior with assorted men, including a student.

As the play unfolds, she desires to be Stella’s rescuer, but ultimately is unable to accomplish anything. The most action she takes toward extricating her sister and herself from Stanley and his abuse is to pretend to telephone and write to a man who is little more than a figment of her imagination.

Likewise, her attempt to secure her own happiness is essentially neurotic, deceitful, and manipulative. When Stanley learns the truth and uses it against her, she is undone by her **own** weaknesses (social pretension, alcoholism, mendacity, and a fixation with the past). Stanley is the antagonist who pursues her, exposes her weaknesses and secrets, and ultimately destroys her.

Tennessee Williams wrote dozens of short one-act plays, including his first play, “Beauty Is the Word,” written in 1930 while he was in college. He seemed drawn to the unity of the form, as well as to the tautness of the structure. Drama critics have theorized, also, that the one-act structure made Williams’s work more adaptable to film.

As a one-act play, *A Streetcar Named Desire* differs somewhat in structure from the more traditional two- or three-act dramatic structures. The playwright did not designate an intermission break within the original script. However, most theatrical companies do include an intermission, selecting whatever they consider to be a dramatic high point to interrupt the flow of the action into two “acts.”

In a typical three-act play, each act ends on a significant plot point. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, most critics agree that these plot points are found in Scene Three and Scene Eight. Collectively, the plot points build toward the climax in Scene Ten. Each scene can be studied as a contained unit, as the action rises toward the plot points and ultimate climax. Most of the scenes also end on a note of tension or suspense, usually reinforced by the musical score. (The Blue Piano music ends seven of the eleven scenes, while the Varsouviana Polka closes two.)





## Plot Summary

Scene One begins on what Williams describes as “the first dark of an early evening in May.” The sky is a “peculiarly tender blue, almost turquoise.” The setting is Elysian Fields Avenue in New Orleans, a poor neighborhood, but with a “raffish charm.” The main set is a two-story house with steps leading from the street to both apartments. Screens, projections, and lighting effects will allow walls to appear and disappear, at times showing the exterior of the house, while at others revealing the inside. At the beginning of the play, the exterior of the house is showing.

Stanley Kowalski and his friend Mitch enter boisterously, and Stanley bellows for his Stella. She appears on the landing of the first-floor apartment, in a pose that is probably supposed to be reminiscent of the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. Stella upbraids Stanley for “hollering” at her, and he tosses her a package of meat and tells her he is going bowling. She follows soon after to watch.

Enter Blanche DuBois, Stella’s older sister, and the protagonist of the play. She is described as moth-like, her white suit, hat, and gloves making her look “incongruous to [the] setting.” She appears to be lost, but Stanley and Stella’s upstairs neighbor convinces her that she has indeed arrived at the correct address. Blanche informs the neighbor that she rode the streetcar line named “Desire,” transferred to the “Cemeteries” line, and finally arrived at Elysian Fields (Avenue).

Blanche is appalled by her sister’s apartment. In the space between her entrance and Stella’s return, she finds the whiskey, helps herself to a generous drink, and then hides the evidence.

Stella returns, and in the sisters’ reunion, the audience learns that Stella was expected but arrived several weeks early. She has apparently taken a leave of absence (or been given a leave of absence) from her teaching job. The most important revelation, however, is that the DuBois family plantation, Belle Reve, has been lost. It apparently fell to Blanche to care for a parade of aged and ill relations—all of whom eventually died—with dwindling resources except for her teacher’s salary. She expresses bitterness that Stella was not available to help, arriving only for the funerals, never witnessing the suffering that preceded them. For her part, Stella insists that the only thing she could have done was leave the plantation and support herself.

Stanley returns and meets Blanche. Immediately there is tension between them—especially after Stanley notices that Blanche has been drinking his whiskey and then claims that she hasn’t. He asks her about her own marriage, and the audience learned that her husband, whom she call a “boy,” died.

In Scene Two, Stanley learns of the loss of Belle Reve, and the audience has its first glance of Stanley’s near-violent temper. He is confident that Blanche has somehow cheated Stella (and by extension him) out of her rightful inheritance. He mistakes her ragtag wardrobe for expensive clothing and cheap paste and rhinestones for valuable jewels. He reveals his own lack of sophistication by insisting that he knows people who can appraise Blanche’s “treasures,” so he and Stella will know the truth of how Blanche has squandered their fortune. It is revealed, however, that the plantation was mortgaged and foreclosed upon, and Blanche is penniless. Stanley’s tantrum and Blanche’s reaction to his pawing through her belongings, widens the rift between them.



Scene Three is poker night. The audience meets Mitch, who is more sensitive than the other men in the play, as he cares for his ailing mother. Blanche acts flirtatiously and “lady-like” before the men who, with the exception of Mitch, are far from gentlemanly. Mitch and Blanche seem to hit it off, suggesting that a relationship might develop between them, but Blanche and Stella anger the drunk Stanley, who throws a violent outburst and hits Stella. The sisters flee, but Stella soon returns to Stanley in a reconciliation with obvious sexual undertones.

Scene Four allows the audience to see the growing rift between the sisters. Blanche is appalled at Stella’s current life and implores her to remember their superior upbringing. She remembers a former beau (now married) whom she ran into the following winter, and she insists that he will give the sisters the money to free themselves from their current situation. Stella insists that she does not desire to be “freed,” and she again alludes to the physical passion she and Stanley share. Stanley overhears Blanche’s dismissing him as common and animalistic, and the scene ends with Stella embracing him—obviously allying herself with her husband—as he addresses Blanche in a tone that clearly suggests to the audience that he intends to destroy her.

In Scene Five, Blanche is writing a letter to her former/imaginary beau, asking for money to escape the Kowalski apartment. The upstairs neighbors have a fight similar to the one we witnessed between Stanley and Stella in Scene Three. Stanley confronts Blanche with some evidence of her tawdry past and her current lies—a man he works with knows of Blanche’s reputation and the fact that she lived for a while in a hotel known for prostitution. Alone in the apartment, waiting for Mitch to arrive for a date, Blanche attempts to seduce a young man collecting for the evening paper. She chastises herself, suggesting to the audience that this kind of thing has happened before. Mitch arrives, and they go on their date.

In Scene Six, Mitch and Blanche return from their date, tired and dispirited. Mitch treats Blanche as if she were a naive, unspoiled girl—and it is clear that Blanche has given him that impression. They confide in one another—Mitch’s self-consciousness about his size and appearance, and Blanche’s marriage to a sensitive young man she discovered was a homosexual. When she confronted her husband and told him that he disgusted her, he committed suicide. The music that was playing the night of the suicide (the Varsouviana Polka) and the sound of the gunshot have haunted Blanche ever since. Mitch responds tenderly, admitting that he needs someone, and Blanche needs someone. The scene ends with the expectation that a serious romance is developing for the two of them.

Scene Seven begins with the preparations for Blanche’s birthday celebration. While Blanche is bathing, yet again, Stanley tells Stella all the details of Blanche’s debauched past in Laurel, Mississippi. The truth of Blanche’s life is underscored by Blanche herself singing songs about illusion and deception. Stanley tells Stella that he told Mitch what he knew about Blanche. By the time Blanche emerges for her celebration, the tension on stage is palpable.

Scene Eight depicts the celebration itself. The atmosphere is tense, and Mitch is conspicuously absent. Blanche, ever the fan of illusion, tries to create a festive air. As a “birthday present,” Stanley gives Blanche a one-way bus ticket back to Laurel, Mississippi. As he is ready to leave to go bowling, Stella goes into labor and asks Stanley to take her to the hospital.

In the aftermath of the birthday party, in Scene Nine, Blanche is drinking and haunted by the music to which her young husband killed himself. Mitch arrives, and they have a confrontation about the lies she has told him. She insists they were not “lies” but versions of the truth as it *should have been*. She admits her affairs with soldiers, various other anonymous men, even a high school student. This last was the event that resulted in her being asked to leave her job and leave town. She had nowhere to go but Stella’s apartment. When she asks Mitch to marry her, he says that she isn’t “clean enough” to take home to his mother.

Scene Ten reveals an almost-completely unraveled Blanche dressed in an ancient, wrinkled, and soiled debutante gown and rhinestone tiara. She is drunkenly and psychotically reliving a night from her past when Stanley enters with the news that the baby is not yet born, and he has been sent home to rest. Blanche claims that she has received a telegram from her former/imaginary beau, inviting her on a cruise of the Caribbean. She also claims that, after their initial confrontation, Mitch returned with roses to apologize, and she broke it off with him in order to accept her beau’s invitation. Stanley confronts her with her lie, and as he attacks her emotionally and psychologically, destroying every illusion she has spent the play creating, he also attacks her physically, carrying her off stage, where he will rape her.

Scene Eleven shows the catastrophe, the disastrous resolution of the tragedy. Stella, now a mother, ambiguously admits that she believes Blanche’s accusation that Stanley raped her, but *chooses* not to in order to stay with her husband. The now thoroughly destroyed Blanche is taken to a state mental hospital, and a broken Mitch watches in despair. The play ends with Stanley assuring Stella that everything will be all right, and the men in the apartment playing another game of poker.

### Characters

**Blanche Dubois** – The protagonist, Blanche is an aging Southern belle, given to pretension, self-delusion, and drink. Her name, Blanche, means “white” in French; DuBois means “of the woods.” She is the only character to appear in every scene.

**Stanley Kowalski** – The antagonist, Stanley is raw, masculine power. Coarse and animal-like, he seeks to control his world and everything in it.

**Stella Dubois Kowalski** – Married to Stanley, Stella is Blanche’s younger sister. Pregnant and completely in love with her husband, she is occasionally caught in the cross-fire between Blanche and Stanley. Her name means “star.”

**Harold Mitchell** – Known as “Mitch,” he is Stanley’s friend, coworker, poker buddy, and a veteran of the same Army unit. For a while, he dates Blanche, and a serious romance almost develops between them.

**Eunice Hubbell** – A friend to Stella, she and her husband own the house where the Kowalskis live and occupy an apartment upstairs.

**Steve Hubbell** – A minor character, he plays poker with Stanley and is married to Eunice.

**Pablo Gonzales** – A poker player, he completes the foursome with Stanley, Steve, and Mitch.

**Nurse** – An unnamed woman, her job is to escort Blanche to a mental hospital.

**Doctor** – An unnamed man, he has been sent to take Blanche to a mental hospital.

**Negro Woman** – Appearing only in Scenes One and Ten, she exemplifies the loose social conventions of New Orleans.

**A Young Collector** – Blanche’s attempted seduction of the young man foreshadows the revelation about her seduction of a student.

**A Mexican Woman** – Her cry of “*flores para los muertos*” punctuates Blanche’s reminiscence about death and loss. ■

## Formalist Approach Applied to *A Streetcar Named Desire*



### Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is often dismissed as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



Three main areas of study:

- form
- diction
- unity

## 1. Form

- Cadence—how the words sound. When a character or a narrator is speaking, the sound of what he or she is saying, or how he or she is saying it, can give clues as to who the character is and why he or she is in the work.
- Repetition—saying the same word, phrase, or concept over and over. Obviously, when something is repeated several times, it must be important.
- Recurrences—when an event or a theme happens more than once. Like repetition, when something is repeated, it is for a reason.
- Relationships—the connections between the characters. By looking carefully at the connections among the people in the story, one can understand the meaning of a work. Every character is put into the story for a reason. The reader's job is to find that reason.

## 2. Diction

- Denotation—the dictionary definition of a word. Obviously, understanding the meaning of the words used is vital to understanding a text. If a reader does not know what the words mean, he or she can have no idea what is being said.
- Connotation—the subtle, commonly accepted meanings of words. Even though a word may technically mean one thing, the way it is used in society will often place a slightly different spin on the word. Take for instance the word “condescension.” Though it literally means “the act of coming down voluntarily to equal terms with a supposed inferior to do something,” modern use of the word gives it a negative cast—when someone “condescends” now, he or she is acting superior to someone else.
- Etymology—the study of the evolution of a word's meaning and use. Etymology is especially helpful when one is studying an old text in which the words might literally mean something different from what they mean today. A close study of words also helps a reader understand why the author uses a particular word rather than a synonym.



- Allusions—links from the text at hand to other works. Though this area is less formalist than the others (because it reaches outside of a text for meaning), it is still valuable to consider all of the “connotations” of the word used. There is a reason the author wanted to link his or her text to that of another author, and studying the allusion is the only way to reveal that reason.
- Ambiguity—is the use of an open-ended word or phrase that has multiple meanings. Just as the formalist asserts that a lack of form is a form, ambiguity can be used to connect several loose ends in a work. The author can use ambiguity to help reveal his or her meaning.
- Symbol—a concrete word or image used mainly to represent an abstract concept. Understanding the use of a word or image to suggest deeper meanings can help a reader gain more from the text. The meaning of the text can be found in the many facets of a symbol.

### 3. Unity

- The use of one symbol, image, figure of speech, etc. throughout a work serves as a thread to connect one particular instance with every other occurrence of that symbol. Unity helps remind the reader of what has already happened and shows him or her how what is happening currently relates to earlier events or forthcoming events.
- Formalist critics do not look for perfect unity. They look for tension and conflict. Irony and paradox are very important—irony being the use of a word or a statement that is the opposite of what is intended or expected, and paradox being the existence of two contradictory truths. This tension is what drives the work. ■

**Essential Questions for A Formalist Reading**

1. Does the work exhibit the characteristics of a particular form, or does it have a unique form?
2. In what manner is this story told? Chronologically? Via flashbacks?
3. Is there closure in the narrative? Or is the reader left guessing?
4. What is the point of view of the narrator? How does this point of view affect the story being told?
5. Is the author using a meter? What effect is achieved?
6. Is there any sound that keeps recurring throughout the work? What is it? What does it mean? How does it affect the work?
7. How does any rhythm in the words affect the work?
8. Where are examples of foreshadowing?
9. Are there any visual patterns in the work? What do they do for the work?
10. What details of the setting seem to indicate meaning? (Time of day, season, physical location, weather?)
11. What would a diagram of the plot look like?
12. Are there any unfamiliar words? Look them up.
13. Are there any paradoxes in the work? Any ironies? What are they? What effect do they have on the tone or plot of the work?

**Focus of the Study**

- Analyzing the repetitive use of musical themes in a dramatic production
- Exploring the use of costumes to develop characters
- Examining the repetitive use of motifs

## Activity One

### Analyzing the Repetitive Use of Musical Themes

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *A Streetcar Named Desire*: Formalist Activity One Questions: Varsouviana, The Blue Piano, and Other Music and Sounds.
2. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three (NOTE: as each group will be examining the entire play, you might want to leave the groups large enough to make the task manageable).
3. Assign each group (or allow each to choose) either the Varsouviana, the Blue Piano, or other music and sounds.
4. Have each group examine the play and answer the questions on the handouts that pertain to their assigned topic.
5. Reconvene the class and ask a representative of each group to present its answers.
6. As a class, discuss the following questions:
  - Recognizing that the experiences of *reading* a play and *viewing* a play are very different, how do Williams's stage directions pertaining to music and sound effects contribute to (or detract from) your understanding of the play? Your *appreciation* of the play?
  - How does the music replace what would be narration in a novel? Specifically, how does the playwright use the Blue Piano music and the Varsouviana to communicate emotions and transitions?
  - How important are the music and sound effects to your understanding of the plot? The characters?
  - What effect do the music and sound effects attempt to create?



## A Streetcar Named Desire: Formalist Activity One

### Questions: Varsouviana

1. When does the audience first hear the Varsouviana?

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2. With what character or plot element is the music associated? What specifically is happening, being said, or being revealed when the music begins playing?

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3. When does the music end? What specifically is happening, being said, or being revealed when the music stops playing?

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4. How many times is the Varsouviana heard in the play?

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5. List the scenes in which the song is played. Then, indicate what is happening, being said, or being revealed when the music begins and when it ends. Finally, for each use, what words does Williams use to describe the mood of the song (e.g., the song plays calmly, wildly, etc.)?

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6. How does the playwright's use of the Varsouviana develop the character of Blanche?

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7. How does the progressive use of the Varsouviana theme propel the action of the play?

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8. How does the progressive use of the Varsouviana theme heighten the suspense or tension of the play?

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9. How essential would it be for a company planning a production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* to make certain they had the music of the Varsouviana to play during their performances? Why?

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## A Streetcar Named Desire: Formalist Activity One

### Questions: The Blue Piano

1. When does the audience first hear the music of the Blue Piano?  

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2. With what character or plot element is the music associated? What specifically is happening, being said, or being revealed when the music begins playing?  

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3. When does the music end? What specifically is happening, being said, or being revealed when the music stops playing?  

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4. How many times is the Blue Piano heard in the play?  

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5. List the scenes in which the music is played. Then, indicate what is happening, being said, or being revealed when the music begins and when it ends. Finally, for each use, what words does Williams use to describe the mood of the music (e.g., the music plays calmly, wildly, etc.)?  

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6. How does the playwright's use of the Blue Piano develop the character of Stanley? Of Stella? Of Blanche?

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7. How does the progressive use of the Blue Piano music propel the action of the play?

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8. How does the progressive use of the Blue Piano music heighten the suspense or tension of the play?

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9. How essential would it be for a company planning a production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* to make certain they had appropriate music for the Blue Piano to play during their performances? Why?

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## A Streetcar Named Desire: Formalist Activity One

### Questions: Other Music and Sounds

1. In addition to the Varsouviana and the Blue Piano music, what other music, background noise, or sound effects are called for in the script?

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2. For *each* song or effect listed above, list the scenes in which the effect is heard. Then, indicate what is happening, being said, or being revealed when the effect begins and when it ends. Finally, what is the *purpose* of the sound (e.g., advance the plot, develop character, create mood)?

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3. With what character or plot element is each sound associated? What specifically is happening, being said, or being revealed when the sound begins? When the sound ends?

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4. How does the playwright's use of music and sound effects develop the character of Stanley? Of Stella? Of Blanche?

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5. How does the playwright's use of music and sound effects propel the action of the play?

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6. How does the playwright's use of music and sound effects heighten the suspense or tension of the play?

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7. How essential would it be for a company planning a production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* to make certain they had appropriate music and sound effects to play during their performances? Why?

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**Activity Two****Analyzing the Use of Costume to Develop the Character**

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *A Streetcar Named Desire*: Formalist Approach Activity Two: Analysis of Blanche's Costumes and *A Streetcar Named Desire* Formalist Activity Two: Questions.
2. Divide the students into small groups, keeping the groups large enough so that each group can review the entire play.
3. Have each group review the entire play and complete the charts on the *Analysis of Blanche's Costumes* handout.
4. Have students in their groups discuss the questions on the *Questions* handout.
5. Reconvene the class and allow each group to report its findings.
6. As a class, discuss the questions on the *Questions* handout.



A Streetcar Named Desire: Formalist Activity Two

Analysis of Blanche's Costumes

Use the chart below to graph the information in the above chart, especially key events in the development of the plot, key stages in Blanche's character development, and the corresponding costume notes.

Scene	What is Blanche wearing? (e.g. green pants suit)	Key descriptive words e.g. moldy-looking, clingy)	Key plot events (e.g. Blanche first mentions husband)	Important previous event(s) (e.g. Blanche received news of former beau's death)	Blanche's emotional or psychological state (e.g. agitated but optimistic)
Scene One					
Scene Two					
Scene Three					
Scene Four					



Scene	What is Blanche wearing? (e.g. <i>green pants suit</i> )	Key descriptive words e.g. <i>moldy-looking, clingy</i>	Key plot events (e.g. <i>Blanche first mentions husband</i> )	Important previous event(s) (e.g. <i>Blanche received news of former beau's death</i> )	Blanche's emotional or psychological state (e.g. <i>agitated but optimistic</i> )
Scene Five					
Scene Six					
Scene Seven					
Scene Eight					





Scene	What is Blanche wearing? (e.g. <i>green pants suit</i> )	Key descriptive words e.g. <i>moldy-looking, clingy</i>	Key plot events (e.g. <i>Blanche first mentions husband</i> )	Important previous event(s) (e.g. <i>Blanche received news of former beau's death</i> )	Blanche's emotional or psychological state (e.g. <i>agitated but optimistic</i> )
Scene Nine					
Scene Ten					
Scene Eleven					

Scene One: Blanche arrives, lost, appalled at Stella's apartment; signs of alcohol abuse of lying.  
Wearing a white suit described as "moth-like." She is obviously lost and her appearance is "incongruous to [the] setting."

Scene Ten: The rape.

Scene Eleven: Blanche is taken away—emotionally and psychologically destroyed.  
Yellow silk dress, "Della Robbia" jacket.  
Seahorse pin and artificial violets.



## A Streetcar Named Desire: Formalist Activity Two

### Questions

1. How does Williams use costume notes to suggest aspects of Blanche's character? Please give specific examples. (For example, what does Blanche's costume in the opening scene suggest about her? How do the stage directions and costume notes work to introduce Blanche to the audience?)

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2. How and why does Williams use dialogue to call attention to and/or explain particular aspects of Blanche's costumes?

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3. How do costuming changes signal changes in the character?

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4. How do costuming changes correspond to key plot developments?

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5. How does the use of costuming communicate information about the characters that would be included in the narration of a novel?

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6. How does the costuming affect your impression of the other character: Stanley? Stella? Mitch and the poker players?

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- A. Does the costuming make these characters more or less realistic? Why?

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- B. More or less sympathetic? Why?

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7. How is costuming used to compare and contrast characters within the same scene?

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### Activity Three

#### Analyzing Williams's Use of Motifs and Recurring Imagery

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *A Streetcar Named Desire*: Formalist Activity Three: Analyzing Motifs and Recurring Images.
2. As a class, make a list of the various motifs and recurring images or ideas that appear in the play.

Do allow students to suggest—and take note of—all reasonable motifs, but guide the students to include:

- Blanche's baths
  - Animal imagery
  - Light versus dark
  - Physical versus emotional intimacy
3. Divide the students into enough groups so that each identified motif is explored by at least one group.
  4. Have each group examine the play and complete the requested information on the handout for its assigned motif or image.
  5. Reconvene the class and allow each to report its findings.
  6. As a class, explore and discuss the effectiveness of Williams's use of these motifs or recurring images.
    - What does repetition of the motifs accomplish that could not be accomplished through more conventional narrative means?
    - Does the fact that, as a play, *Streetcar* was intended to be viewed and not read have any bearing on the motifs Williams chose and how he used them?
    - In what way(s) does Williams's use of these motifs help him or hinder him in communicating with his audience?



A Streetcar Named Desire: Formalist Activity Three

Analyzing Motifs and Recurring Images

Motif or Image Being Analyzed: \_\_\_\_\_

How is this motif/image generally used (e.g., plot device, sound or visual effect, etc.)? \_\_\_\_\_

As you review the play, answer the following questions for *each occurrence* of your assigned motif/image.

Scene	With what character(s) is the motif/image associated? (If any)	What is happening when the motif/image appears?	Does the motif/image advance the plot? (How?)	Does the motif/image develop character? (Who? How?)	Does the motif/image contribute to tone or mood? (In what way?)	Is any pattern or progression apparent with each successive occurrence of this motif/image? (Describe)
Scene One						
Scene Two						
Scene Three						
Scene Four						



Scene	With what character(s) is the motif/image associated? (If any)	What is happening when the motif/image appears?	Does the motif/image advance the plot? (How?)	Does the motif/image develop character? (Who? How?)	Does the motif/image contribute to tone or mood? (In what way?)	Is any pattern or progression apparent with each successive occurrence of this motif/image? (Describe)
Scene Five						
Scene Six						
Scene Seven						
Scene Eight						



Briefly explain the purpose of the motif or image you are analyzing and its overall contribution to the meaning or impact of the play.

[illegible]

## Discussion Questions

1. How does Williams employ nonverbal techniques to provide additional information to his audience?
2. Does Williams provide closure to the story? Why or why not?
3. Are there any paradoxes in the play? Any ironies? What are they? What effect do they have on the tone or plot of the work?
4. How do the setting (essentially the interior of a two-room apartment) and the narrative timeline (chronological order with no flashbacks) contribute to the emotional and psychological impact of the play?

## Essays or Writing Assignments

1. In his famous work, *The Poetics*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that well-crafted plays had to adhere to the three Unities: Unity of Time, Unity of Place, and Unity of Action. Write a well-reasoned and well-supported essay in which you demonstrate how effectively Williams adhered to these three unities and the effect this adherence (or lack thereof) had on the overall success of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.
2. Support, refute, or qualify the thesis that the plot structure and events and the development of the character of Blanche DuBois all support an interpretation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* as a tragedy.
3. In a well-developed essay, analyze the use of audio and visual effects as narrative and dramatic devices in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

## Feminist Theory Applied to *A Streetcar Named Desire*



### Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.

Three main areas of study/points of criticism:

1. differences between men and women
2. women in positions of power and power dynamics between men and women
3. the female experience

**1. Differences between men and women**

- The basic assumption is that gender determines everything, including values and language.
- The canon must be expanded to include the study of those genres in which women “traditionally” write: journals, diaries, and personal letters.
- Note the differences in the topics or issues about which men and women write and the perspectives from which they write about them.

**2. Women in positions of power and power dynamics between men and women**

- Note and confront the social, economic, and political exploitation of women. Note whether women have any power and of what variety it is.
- Society has not treated all of its constituencies fairly, and literature is a means by which inequities can be identified, protested, and possibly rectified.
- Note the division of labor and economics between men and women.
- Note how men and women interact with one another in a variety of contexts (romantic, professional, etc.). Does the woman act in any way subservient to the man? Does the man treat the woman like an adult? A political and economic equal?

**3. The female experience**

- A woman’s experience of life is different from a man’s on the most basic level. Examine what aspects of feminine life are included in the work. Note the point of view through which the events are told. Is it male or female? Pay attention to how the narrator, male or female, treats the events. For example, are they depicted with sensitivity, harshness, etc.?

- Reject the application of male standards to the female personality. Feminists believe that the female personality is a separate entity from the male personality, and if judged by the same measures, is judged incorrectly. The female personality must be judged independently from the male personality and vice versa.
- Examine, and possibly celebrate, the creative, life-giving role of femininity. Although women have traditionally been portrayed as dependent on men for everything, the fact is that men are dependent on women for the most basic necessity in the world—birthing children. A male’s relationship to his mother has always been portrayed as a very strong bond (whether in the Freudian theory of the Oedipal complex or modern phrases such as “Mama’s boy”).
- Explore the concept that men and women are both incomplete without each other (women cannot conceive without men, etc.) not of feminine “incompleteness” alone (Adam’s rib, Freudian theories on sexuality, etc.). ■

**Essential Questions for A Feminist Reading**

1. What stereotypes of women are present? Are female characters oversimplified? Weak? Foolish? Excessively naive?
2. Do the female characters play major or minor roles in the action of the work? Are they supportive or independent? Powerless or strong? Subservient or in control?
3. If the female characters have any power, what kind is it? Political? Economic? Social? Psychological?
4. How do the male characters talk about the female characters?
5. How do the male characters treat the female characters?
6. How do the female characters act toward the male characters?
7. How do the female characters act toward each other?
8. Is the work, in general, sympathetic to female characters? Too sympathetic?
9. Are the female characters and situations in which they are placed oversimplified or presented fully and in detail?
10. What are the predominant images? Are they images usually associated with women? Why or why not?
11. Do any of the work's themes touch upon any idea that could be seen as a feminist issue? Is the theme supportive or disparaging of women?
12. Overall, do you think that the female characters are believable (based on women you know)? For that matter, do you think that the male characters are believable?

**Focus of the Study**

- Examine the portrayal of women as dependent upon men
- Explore the depiction of domestic violence
- Analyze the rape in Scene Ten as an expression of male dominance

## Activity One

### Analyzing the Portrayal of Women as Dependent Upon Men

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *A Streetcar Named Desire: Activity One Selected Passages and Questions*. You may want to distribute the handout in advance and ask students to read the assigned passages before class to provide more time for discussion.
2. Divide the students into two groups or a number of smaller groups divisible by two.
3. Ask each group to read the assigned passages before answering the questions. The groups will read the same passages before answering different questions.
4. Reconvene the class and ask a representative of each group to present its answers.
5. As a class, explore and discuss the following final questions.
  - What is the playwright's attitude toward women? How does he communicate this attitude?
  - How are Blanche and Stella alike in their responses toward men? How are they different?

## **A Streetcar Named Desire: Feminist Activity One**

### **Selected Passages**

#### **Scene One**

*[Two men come around the corner, Stanley Kowalski and Mitch]*

**Stella:** Be over soon.

#### **Scene Three**

**Blanche:** Where is my little sister? Stella? Stella?

**Blanche:** Yes. *[During the pause, she looks up at the sky.]* There's so much—so much confusion in the world.*[He coughs diffidently.]* Thank you for being so kind! I need kindness now.

#### **Scene Four**

**Blanche:** I take it for granted that you still have sufficient memory of Belle Reve. *[As the lights fade away, with a lingering brightness on their embrace, the music of the “Blue Piano” and the trumpet and drums is heard.]*

#### **Scene Five**

**Stanley:** Shaw must've got you mixed up .

**Blanche:** Have you been listening to me?

#### **Scene Six**

**Blanche:** I think you have a great capacity for devotion.

**Blanche:** Sometimes—there's God—so quickly!

#### **Scene Seven**

**Stella:** I don't believe all those stories and I think your supply man was mean and rotten to tell them. *[The distant piano goes into hectic breakdown.]*



## Scene Eight

**Blanche:** QUIET IN THERE! [*He is with her now, supporting her with his arm, murmuring indistinguishably as they go outside.*]

## Scene Nine

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## Scene Eleven

**Stella:** I—just told her that—we’d made arrangements for her to rest in the country.

**Stella:** Yes, Blanche. [*To Eunice*] Tell her how well she’s looking.

**Blanche:** I can smell the sea air.

**Stanley:** She says she forgot something.

**Stanley:** You left nothing here but spilt talcum.

**Steve:** This game is seven-card stud.



## ***A Streetcar Named Desire: Feminist Activity One***

### **Questions for Group A**

#### **Examining Blanche's Dependence Upon Men**

1. How does Blanche see herself in relation to men? Does she consider herself superior or needy? Please find specific examples.

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2. What evidence is there that Blanche is independent?

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3. What evidence is there that Blanche is dependent on men?

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4. How has her independence or dependence determined the course of her life?

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5. How does Williams use dialogue and stage directions to establish Blanche's independence or dependence upon men?

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6. In what ways is Blanche's relationship with Stanley similar to her relationships with other men? How is it different?

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## ***A Streetcar Named Desire: Feminist Activity One***

### **Questions for Group B**

#### **Examining Stella's Dependence Upon Men**

1. How does Stella see herself in relation to men? Does she consider herself superior or needy? Please find specific examples.

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2. What evidence is there that Stella is independent?

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3. What evidence is there that Stella is dependent on men?

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4. How has her independence or dependence determined the course of her life?

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5. How does Williams use dialogue and stage directions to establish Stella's independence or dependence upon men?

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6. In what ways is Stella's relationship with Stanley mutually beneficial? In what ways is it destructive?

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**Activity Two****Discerning the Playwright's Attitude Toward Domestic Violence**

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *A Streetcar Named Desire: Activity Two Selected Passages and Questions*.
2. Divide the students into an even number of groups.
3. Designate half the groups as “A” and half as “B.”
4. Have each group read the assigned passages before answering the questions.

*NOTE: The groups will read the same passages before answering different questions.*

5. Reconvene the class and ask a representative of each group to present its answers.
6. As a class, discuss the following questions:
  - What is the prevailing attitude on Elysian Fields Avenue toward domestic violence?
  - Does the play seem to condone or condemn domestic violence? In what ways?

## A Streetcar Named Desire: Feminist Activity Two

### Selected Passages

#### Scene Three

*There is a picture of Van Gogh's of a billiard parlor. [Steve and Pablo laugh. The sisters appear around the corner.]*

*[The bathroom door opens and Stella comes out].*

**Blanche:** Yes. *[During the pause, she looks up at the sky.]* There's so much—so much confusion in the world. *[He coughs diffidently.]* Thank you for being so kind! I need kindness now.

#### Scene Five

*A disturbance is heard upstairs at the Hubbells' apartment.]*

**Stanley:** You can count on it up to five hundred.

**Stanley:** Shaw must've got you mixed up.

**Blanche:** I have to admit, I love to be waited on.

**Stella:** It *will* happen!

**Blanche:** Ah me, ah, me, ah, me.

#### Scene Eight

*Three-quarters of an hour later.*

**Blanche:** Then let me tell one.

**Blanche:** Apparently Mr. Kowalski was not amused.

**Blanche:** What happened while I was bathing? What did he tell you, Stella?

**Stanley:** Stell, it's gonna be all right after she goes. *[He is with her now, supporting her with his arm, murmuring indistinguishably as they go outside.]*



## Scene Ten

**Stanley:** As a matter of fact, there wasn't no wire at all.

**Stanley:** We've had this date with each other from the beginning.

## Scene Eleven

**Stanley:** You left nothing here but spilt talcum. [*Stella rushes into Eunice's embrace.*]

[*The poker players stand back.*]

[*The luxurious sobbing, the sensual murmur fade.*]



## ***A Streetcar Named Desire: Feminist Activity Two***

### **Questions for Group A**

1. How does Williams use scenery, dialogue, and lighting at the beginning of Scene Three to establish conditions that are apt to produce domestic violence?

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2. How does Williams use musical themes to underscore and punctuate the action in Scene Three?

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3. Does the argument over the radio in Scene Three seem to be a unique event or a typical occurrence? What evidence supports this?

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4. What purpose does the offstage conflict between the Hubbells serve?

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5. What does Stella's response (end of Scene Three and beginning of Scene Four) to Stanley's behavior suggest about her? About Stanley? About their marriage?

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6. What do Stanley's and Stella's behavior at the end of the play suggest about the future?

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## A Streetcar Named Desire: Feminist Activity Two

### Questions for Group B

1. How does Williams use scenery, dialogue, lighting, and costume notes in Eight Scene to heighten the tension and set the stage for the ensuing conflict between Stella and Stanley?

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A. In Scene Eleven?

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2. What details does the playwright include that might encourage an audience to feel sympathy for Stanley? What details does the playwright include that might lessen audience sympathy for Stanley?

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3. How does Williams use music to punctuate the action in Scenes Eight, Ten, and Eleven?

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4. Is Stanley's *anger* in Scene Eight justified? How? Are his *actions* justified? How?

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5. Is Stanley's *anger* in Scene Ten justified? How? Are his *actions* justified? How?

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6. What do Stanley's and Stella's behavior at the end of the play suggest about the future?

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## Activity Three

### Examining Blanche's Rape as Either Dramatic Device or Misogynistic Statement

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *A Streetcar Named Desire*: Feminist Activity Three Questions and *A Streetcar Named Desire* Feminist Activity Three: Analyzing Rising Action and Climax.
2. As a class, review the sequence of events as well as the progression of moods that culminate in the rape in Scene Ten:
  - What is Blanche doing at the beginning of the scene? What is her frame of mind?
  - What has Stanley been doing immediately prior to his entrance? What is *his* frame of mind?
  - What is Blanche's disposition at learning she will be alone in the apartment with Stanley? Why?
  - What is Stanley's initial mood when telling Blanche that they will be alone? Why?
  - At what point in the scene does the mood change for Blanche? What does the mood change to?
  - At what point in the scene does the mood change for Stanley? What does the mood change to?
3. Divide the class into pairs or small groups.
4. Have each group examine the play and complete the graphic and answer the questions on the handout.
5. Reconvene the class and allow each group to report its findings.
6. As a class, discuss the following questions:
  - What does Stanley mean when he says, "We've had this date with each other from the beginning"?
  - By showing Blanche flirting with Stanley in earlier scenes, is Williams suggesting that her rape in Scene Ten is an act of poetic justice?
  - Does Blanche's relationship with Mitch alter the audience's reaction to Blanche's rape? Why or why not?



## ***A Streetcar Named Desire: Feminist Activity Three***

### **Questions**

1. How does the introduction of Stanley in Scene One foreshadow the rape in Scene Ten?  

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2. How does Blanche's initial reaction to Stanley suggest the start of their conflict?  

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3. What does Blanche's flirtation with Stanley in Scene Two suggest about her character? How might it affect the audience's response to what will happen later?  

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4. Does Blanche's history of promiscuity make her more susceptible to rape? Why or why not?  

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5. What do Blanche's words and actions in Scene Five suggest about her? How might they affect the audience's response to what will happen later?  

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6. What does Stella's reaction to the rape at the end of the play suggest about her? About the overall situation?

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7. What dramatic purpose does the rape serve?

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A. How does it affect the other characters?

• Stanley:

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• Stella:

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• Mitch:

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8. What other possible events would have achieved the same dramatic purpose?

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9. Overall, how sympathetic is the audience to each of the characters *before* the rape? Why?

• Blanche:

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• Stanley:

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• Stella:

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• Mitch:

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10. How sympathetic is the audience to each of the characters *after* the rape? Why?

• Blanche:

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• Stanley:

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• Stella:

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• Mitch:

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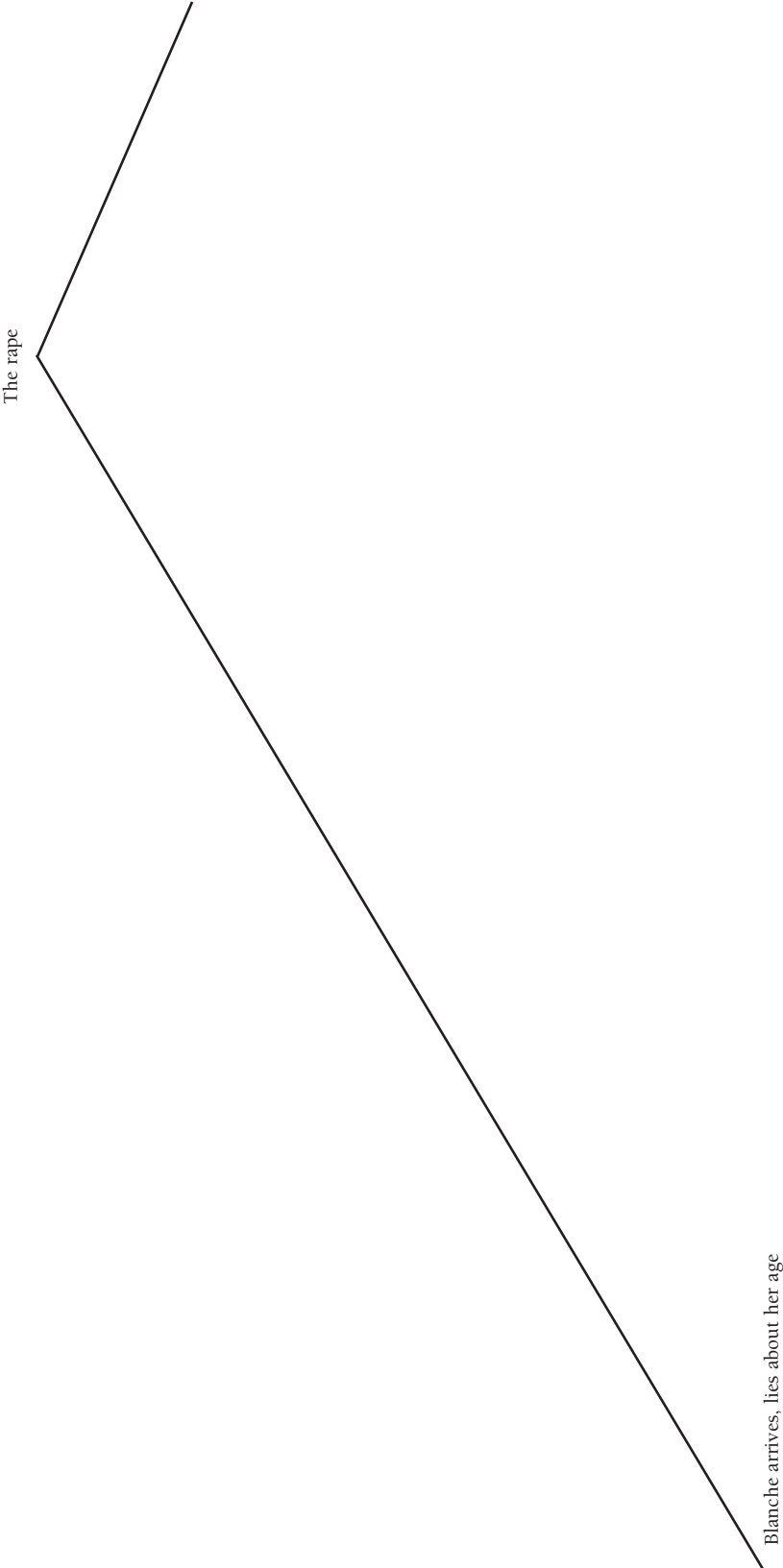
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A Streetcar Named Desire: Feminist Activity Three

Analyzing Rising Action and Climax

Use the graphic below to chart the key plot events in the rising action of the play that prefigure and lead to the climactic rape in Scene Ten. Include plot events that reveal character and may potentially suggest motivation as well.



## Discussion Questions

1. What female stereotypes do the various female characters—Blanche, Stella, Eunice— display? Are these stereotypes central to their characters? Central to the plot?
2. What types of power do the male characters hold over the female characters?
3. Is the play, overall, sympathetic to women? Sympathetic to men? Why or why not? What is Williams's point in placing these characters in this situation?

## Essays or Writing Assignments

1. Tennessee Williams wrote that he originally intended for Blanche to be the most sympathetic character in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In a well-reasoned and well-developed essay, argue whether or not he succeeded. Be certain to include a discussion of how Williams manages to create audience sympathy for her or why she ultimately loses that sympathy.
2. Support, refute, or qualify the thesis that Blanche and Stella, rather than being fully developed characters, are mere character types or stereotypes. Be certain to support all of your claims with direct references to the play.



## A Streetcar Named Desire

## Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *A Streetcar Named Desire*



### Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

#### Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.
- According to psychoanalytic theory, there are three parts to the subconscious, which is the largest part of the human personality.



The three parts are:

1. **The id** – the basic desire. The id is the fundamental root of what a person wants. There is no sense of conscience in it, thus making it everyone's "inner child." Children, before they are taught social skills, operate entirely through the id. They cry in public, wet their diapers, and demand immediate gratification of their needs and desires.
2. **The superego** – the opposite of the id. This is the repository of all socially imposed behavior and sense of guilt. While the id is innate, the superego is learned through parental instruction and living in society. Humans develop a superego by having parents scold them, and other members of society criticize or teach them.
3. **The ego** – reality. The balance between the id and the superego. The ego takes the desires of the id, filters them through the superego, and comes up with an action that satisfies both entities. The ego realizes that the id must be satisfied, but that there are certain socially acceptable ways to achieve satisfaction.

**Main areas of study/points of criticism of the second view:**

According to the second view, an essential relationship exists between the author of the work and the work itself. This view is in direct contrast to the Formalist approach to literature. In order to understand a work, one must fully understand the author's life and emotional stance, and vice versa. Though a work might not be blatantly autobiographical, psychoanalysts argue that there is always something of the author in the work, whether it be a character, character trait, theme, or motif. Often, authors will satirize people they dislike or will be overtly sympathetic to people they do like. This author bias often has an effect on the reader, which is exactly what the author wants. When reading, people are extremely vulnerable to the author's chosen point of view (the only way they hear the story is through the author's narrator). This aspect of the psychoanalytic view is completely subjective and a relatively controversial approach to literature, but the psychoanalysts of the world argue that it is a valid and important type of literary study.

This type of psychoanalytic reading includes the following:

1. Reference to what is known or surmised about the author's personality is used to explain and interpret a literary work. For example, Charles Dickens grew up poor and later wrote books very sympathetic to boys growing up poor.

2. Reference to a literary work is made in order to establish an understanding of the mind of the author. For example, judging by Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, one might reasonably conclude that Harper Lee herself was sympathetic to the plight of black Americans.
3. Studying the literary work of an author is a means of knowing the author as a person. The more novels by Charles Dickens one reads, the more one can infer about the author's beliefs, values, hopes, fears, etc.
4. An artist may put his or her repressed desires on the page in the form of actions performed by characters. Pay attention to behaviors that are not socially "normal" to see if there is any evidence of the id at work. For example, an author who consistently writes stories in which his female characters are weak, dependent, or unintelligent might be expressing latent misogynist tendencies. Likewise, a female author might express her latent misandry through weak, blatantly evil, or thoroughly inconsequential male characters. ■



## Essential Questions for A Psychoanalytic Reading

1. What are the traits of the main character?
2. How does the author reveal those traits?
3. What do you learn about the character through the narrator?
4. What do you learn about the character from the way other characters relate to him or her?
5. What do you infer about the character from his or her thoughts, actions, and speech?
6. What discrepancies exist between the author's portrayal of the character and how other characters react to him or her?
7. What discrepancies exist between the author's portrayal of the character and the reader's inferences?
8. Is the main character a dynamic character (does he or she change throughout the course of the story)? If so, how and why?
9. How does the character view him or herself ?
10. What discrepancies exist between a character's view of him or herself and other characters' reactions, the author's portrayal, and/or reader inference?
11. How do the characters view one another?
12. Is there any discrepancy between a character's personal opinion of himself or herself and how others think about him or her?
13. What types of relationships exist in the work?
14. What types of images are used in conjunction with the character? What do they symbolize?
15. What symbols are used in the course of the story? What do they symbolize?
16. Do any characters have dreams or inner monologues? What is revealed about a character through dreams that would not otherwise be revealed?



17. Are there any inner conflicts within the character? How are these conflicts revealed? How are they dealt with? Are they ever resolved? How?
18. Do any characters perform uncharacteristic actions? If so, what? What could these actions mean?

## Focus of Study

- Analyze the relationship between the author and his protagonist
- Explore autobiographical elements of the work
- Analyze the conflict between the id and the super id of principal characters
- Examine Stanley Kowalski as an expression of unchecked id



## Activity One

### Discerning the Relationship Between the Playwright and his Protagonist

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: Tennessee Williams Biography and *A Streetcar Named Desire*: Psychoanalytic Activity One: Moderator's Questions
2. Review the explanation of the Psychoanalytic Theory, second view, with the entire class if you have not already done so.
3. Divide the class into an even number of teams and assign each (or allow each to choose) one of the following positions:
  - **Team A:** Blanche DuBois expresses the viewpoints of the playwright and exhibits his strengths and weaknesses.
  - **Team B:** Blanche DuBois is a fictional and symbolic character, inspired by the playwright's mother and sister.
4. Have each team examine the Moderator's Questions and then review the play to construct an answer to each question that supports their assigned position.
5. Have each team list any additional support, not necessarily revealed by answering the moderator's questions, that supports its position.
6. Reconvene the class.
7. Use the Moderator's Questions to frame the debate. The instructor may pose the questions or choose student moderators to do so. The moderator(s) should instruct the debaters to cite specific examples from the play to support their points. The moderator also should feel free to introduce follow-up questions of his or her own.
8. After the debate, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each argument.

*NOTE: Although this activity is framed as a "debate," students do not need to agree with one another or even come to consensus. The point is for them to consider both positions and examine the textual and biographical support for each.*



## **A Streetcar Named Desire: Psychoanalytic Activity One**

### **Tennessee Williams Biography**

*A Streetcar Named Desire*, like most of Tennessee Williams's work, is peppered with bits and pieces of his own life, references to his past, and character traits drawn from family members. As much as any playwright of the twentieth century, Williams mined his tumultuous youth and dysfunctional family for inspiration, even as he recreated a world that was both gentler and more vicious than his own.

The playwright was born Thomas Lanier Williams on March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi, to Cornelius Coffin Williams, a traveling shoe salesman, and Edwina Estelle Dakin, a true Southern belle. His mother claimed to trace her ancestry to the Normans, while his father's family was descended from French Huguenots and included notable Tennessee politicians. With his father on the road most of his early life, the young Tom—the second of three children—lived with his mother and siblings at the Mississippi home of his grandfather, an Episcopal minister. This life of refinement in the Deep South came to an unhappy end when Cornelius Williams stopped traveling, went to work in the shoe company's factory and moved the family to St. Louis, Missouri. Biographers generally characterize these years as poor and unhappy. By most accounts, Williams's father was overbearing; his mother was pretentious and controlling; his beloved older sister, Rose, was lovely, intelligent, and mentally fragile. Dakin, whom Tennessee Williams called "my improbable little brother," would ultimately be the steady one and the keeper of the Williams legacy until his own death at age 89 in 2008.

In St. Louis, Williams's father forced the young Tom to work in the shoe factory, a job he loathed and one that drove him almost to a nervous collapse. At the shoe factory, according to several biographies, Williams worked with a young, apparently heterosexual man named Stanley Kowalski. Donald Spoto, one of Williams's biographers, theorizes that Williams was attracted to Kowalski, but maintains that he found no evidence the two were lovers. After a checkered academic career, Williams graduated from the University of Iowa in 1938 (at the age of 27).

Throughout his early years, Williams wrote poetry and plays, winning numerous small awards. His breakthrough came with his most autobiographical work, *The Glass Menagerie*, which opened in Chicago in 1944 and rapidly moved to Broadway. Controlling mother Amanda Wingfield was so thoroughly based on his own mother that, according to Dakin, Williams gave Edwina Williams 50 percent of the profits from the play. The fragile Laura Wingfield was his sister Rose in large measure. Even protagonist Tom Wingfield shared William's initials and given name, as well as his frustrations and flaws. *The Glass Menagerie* earned Williams the Drama Critics' Circle Prize and the Sidney Howard Memorial from the Playwrights Company and brought him overnight fame and wealth.

Like this earlier play, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is populated with characters reminiscent of, or directly drawn from, people in Tennessee Williams's own life. Like his mother, Blanche DuBois is a Southern belle given to pretensions. Like his sister, Blanche teeters precariously on the edge of insanity. And like Williams himself, Blanche drinks and pursues liaisons with inappropriate suitors.



Williams was enormously attached to his sister Rose and bore a lifetime of guilt and heartache over her mental condition. Always fragile, Rose began developing mental and emotional problems as a young woman and lapsed into what a modern psychiatrist might term a serious depression. From accounts, Rose also manifested symptoms of nymphomania—to her mother's acute horror and deep shame.

Rose Williams underwent a frontal lobotomy at age 28 in 1937, and was for the remainder of her life childlike and severely impaired. As Eve Berliner writes in an article published online in *Eve's Magazine*, Edwina Williams authorized the lobotomy on Rose and had it carried out without Williams's knowledge, an act for which he never forgave his mother. Berliner quotes an excerpt from Williams's diary, penned after a 1939 visit to Rose in which Williams called the visit a "horrible ordeal," and mused that he feared a similar end for himself. (Ironically, in 1969 Dakin did commit his older brother to a mental institution because of Williams's alcoholism and drug abuse.)

By the time of Rose's lobotomy, Tennessee Williams had struggled with depression and suffered his first mental breakdown. He also was coming to terms with his homosexuality after experimenting with heterosexual relationships, according to interviews given by Dakin.

After graduating from college, Williams changed his name to Tennessee and moved to New Orleans. Some biographers have speculated that he changed his name to distance himself from his earlier works, which he considered inferior. Others surmise that he chose the name because Tennessee was the home of his father's family and seemed more literary than the more mundane "Tom." Whatever the reason, Tom Williams essentially created a new identity for himself and, as most biographers note, began living a private life as a homosexual.

As David Savran writes in *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*, homosexuality was Williams's open secret. He did not flaunt his sexual orientation, nor did he try to hide it by maintaining a false front as a married man, as did other celebrities and actors of that era. Although Williams lived with longtime partner Frank Merlo from 1947 until Merlo's death from cancer in 1961, he did not publicly "come out" until 1970, during an appearance on *The David Frost Show*.

For a time, while Williams was writing *A Streetcar Named Desire*, he was involved with Pancho Rodriguez Gonzalez, a rough man whom some critics and biographers see as the source of inspiration for Stanley Kowalski. (Other biographers maintain that Williams drew on the less desirable characteristics of his sometimes abusive and reputedly philandering father to create Stanley's brutish nature.) Williams's relationship with Pancho Rodriguez Gonzalez (occasionally referred to as Pancho Rodriguez) is the subject of a play, *Rancho Pancho*, by Gregg Barrios.

One of the poker players in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is named Pablo Gonzales, a possible allusion to Williams's former lover. Williams also created a character named Pablo Gonzales, his first openly homosexual protagonist, in a short story, "The Mysteries of the Joy Rio," which he wrote in 1941 but did not publish until 1954. [Note the differences in the spelling of the last names of the fictional characters and Williams's lover, Gonzalez.]

After the 1961 death of his partner, Frank Merlo, Williams began what would be a prolonged downward spiral. Like many of his characters, he drank and used drugs to excess and battled severe depression. Dakin drew the everlasting wrath of his older brother when in 1969 he committed Williams to a mental hospital in St. Louis, a controversial measure which probably saved the playwright's life. Although Williams continued to write until his death, critics found his later work inferior to the plays he produced during the height of his career from the early 1940s until Merlo's death. Williams, himself, seemed to foretell the trajectory his own life would follow.

Four days before *A Streetcar Named Desire* debuted on Broadway, Williams mused in an essay in the *New York Times* about his sudden stardom and all the changes that had come with it, some not for the better. The essay, "On A Streetcar Named Success," is included in paperback publications of the play and provides valuable insight into the playwright's state of mind at the time. In the essay, Williams wrote of his emotional rise and fall, describing what modern psychiatrists would label a classic depression in which he lost interest in almost everything and "felt too lifeless inside" to ever create another masterwork.

"Security is a kind of death, I think, and it can come to you in a storm of royalty checks beside a kidney-shaped pool in Beverly Hills or anywhere at all that is removed from the conditions that made you an artist, if that's what you are or were or intended to be," Williams wrote.

Williams would continue throughout his life to try to exorcise the demons of his youth and of his own excesses through his writing. He and his family would make appearances time and again as one or more of his memorable characters. It was in the ephemeral Blanche, however, that brother Dakin saw his brother most clearly.

"Blanche is Tennessee," Dakin Williams told Debbie Elliott in a 2002 interview for National Public Radio. "If Tennessee would tell you something, it wouldn't be necessarily true... And so, everything in Blanche was really like Tennessee."

Williams's death in 1983 would mark one last ironic connection to his protagonist Blanche DuBois, who meets a catastrophic end on Elysian Fields Avenue. Alone in a room in the Elysee Hotel (whose French name translates as Elysium or Elysian in English) in New York City, Williams choked to death on a medicine bottle cap after a night of heavy drinking and drug use. Dakin maintained for years that Williams had been murdered, but his claims were largely disregarded.

Williams was one of the most prolific playwrights of the twentieth century, producing dozens of plays and films, and publishing print editions of his screen and stage scripts as well as book-length and short fiction, and a memoir. His work won numerous awards including two Pulitzer Prizes, one for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Fifteen of his plays were made into movies, especially *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which introduced the world to a young and then-unknown Marlon Brando.

## ***A Streetcar Named Desire: Psychoanalytic Activity One***

### **Moderator's Questions**

1. Blanche DuBois is a Southern belle from Mississippi. Tennessee Williams was born in Columbus, Mississippi. The play takes place in New Orleans, where Williams lived for a time. However, a Southern heritage is not enough to make a character the author's alter ego. What else do they have in common? How are they different?
2. Blanche claims that the family plantation, Belle Reve, was lost through the "epic fornications" of her ancestors. Is Tennessee Williams saying that his own Southern heritage was destroyed by the mistakes of his family (marriage of his mother, career choices of his father), or is he commenting symbolically about the South?
3. Blanche drinks. Is Williams drawing upon his own experience with alcohol or is the drinking a plot device?
4. Blanche is described as having a "neurasthenic" personality at the beginning of Scene Six. Is Williams developing her character or expressing his own mental anguish?
5. Allan Gray kills himself after Blanche says she is "disgusted" by his behavior. Stella says Blanche was married to a "degenerate." What is Tennessee Williams saying about homosexuality? What reasons might Williams have for making Gray kill himself?
6. Are the names Stanley Kowalski and Pablo Gonzales personally significant to the playwright?
7. As Williams portrays Blanche slipping into insanity, is he writing about his own mental state, describing his sister's ordeal or creating a fictional and symbolic situation?
8. When Blanche says, "I don't want realism, I want magic," who is really speaking, the character or the author?



## Activity Two

### Exploring the Conflict Between the Id and the Superego of Blanche DuBois

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *A Streetcar Named Desire*: Activity Two Questions.
2. Review with the students the definitions for the three parts of the subconscious—the id, the superego and the ego—as defined in Notes on Psychoanalytic Theory.
3. Divide the class into pairs or small groups.
4. Have each group review the play and answer the questions on the handout.

*NOTE: Caution the students that they should approach each question and answer from a psychoanalytic viewpoint and phrase their answers accordingly. (For example, rather than merely simply contrasting Blanche's desire to be seen as a talented and independent businesswoman with the reality of her being weak and ineffectual, students should stress that, because her ego cannot reconcile her id's view of herself as a talented and independent businesswoman, it protects her by fabricating the deceptions, which her superego half believes.)*

5. Reconvene the class and have each group report its findings.
6. As a class, discuss the following questions:
  - Why does Blanche lie? To what extent does she believe her own lies?
  - How does Blanche see herself? How is her self-image different from the way other characters and the audience see her?
  - How does Blanche reconcile her wants (her id) with her sense of propriety and guilt (her superego)? Or does she?
  - What is significant about the fact that she is psychologically destroyed at the end of the play? What has been the psychoanalytic mechanism of this destruction?



## ***A Streetcar Named Desire: Psychoanalytic Activity Two***

### **Questions**

1. What does Blanche want? How does her id express itself?

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2. What inhibits Blanche?

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3. How does Blanche reconcile the conflict between her id and superego?

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4. What does Blanche reveal about herself with the monologue in **Scene One**?

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5. How are the inconsistencies in Blanche's personality revealed in **Scene Three**?

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6. What is Blanche admitting when she insists to Mitch in **Scene Nine** that she “never lied in [her] heart,” and she tells him, “I don’t want realism. I want magic”?

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7. What psychological need does Mitch’s courtship fill for Blanche? What motivates her treating him differently from the other men with whom she has had relationships?

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## Activity Three

### Analyzing Stanley, Stella, and Blanche as the Three Aspects of the Personality

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *A Streetcar Named Desire: Psychoanalytic Activity Three: Id, Ego, Superego*.
2. Divide the class into an even number of groups.
3. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following groupings:
  - **Group A:** Blanche as Id, Stella as Ego, Stanley as Superego
  - **Group B:** Stanley as Id, Stella as Ego, Blanche as Superego

*NOTE: If some students insist that perhaps Stella is id or superego, you may create additional groups to accommodate those interpretations, but make certain that Stanley as id and Blanche as id are well represented.*

4. Allow each group to divide the task as it sees fit.
5. Have students examine the book and note all dialogue, actions, or stage directions that illustrate the support their group's interpretation.
6. Reconvene the class and allow each group to present its findings.

*NOTE: Students do not need to agree or come to consensus. The point is to examine the different characters in these different roles.*

7. As a class, discuss the following questions:
  - Does one character, more than the others, act out of pure self-interest and self-gratification?
  - Is there any character who is motivated by external standards of right and wrong, or social respectability?

## ***A Streetcar Named Desire: Psychoanalytic Activity Three***

### **Id, Ego, Superego**

The id is the unorganized part of the personality and functions unconsciously—the individual is not consciously aware of the effect of the id's drives on his or her thoughts and behavior.

- Id governs an individual's most basic needs or desires: food, water, sex.
- It operates on the “pleasure-pain principle”: seek pleasure and avoid pain by any means possible.
- Id is completely amoral; there is no “right and wrong” except the seeking of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.
- It is completely egocentric; no one else's desires matter.
- It demands immediate satisfaction.
- Id has no sense of time; everything is in the present.
- It is completely illogical, its governing “logic” being the pleasure-pain principle.

Freud divided the id's drives and instincts into two categories:

- life instincts include those drives that are crucial to pleasurable survival, such as eating, drinking, sleeping, and sexual activity;
- death instincts reflect the individual's unconscious wish to die, to end the daily struggles for primal satisfaction. This desire for peace manifests itself in all attempts to escape reality like reading fiction; consuming television, movies, plays and other media; and using and abusing drugs.

The ego is a component of the organized part of the personality and functions consciously—the individual is aware of his or her thought processes and decisions that attempt to balance instinctive/unconscious impulses and social and cultural regulations.

- Ego acts according to the reality principle; not all impulses can be acted on, or desires fulfilled, immediately; societal norms and other people need to be taken into consideration.



- Its purpose is to fulfill the id's desires in ways that will benefit the personality in the long term rather than bringing unfulfillment and/or unhappiness.
- It represents the part of the awareness commonly called the “reason” or “common sense.”

Freud compared the relationship of the ego to the id as a rider (ego) controlling a powerful horse (id) and using its energy to travel. (Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 1923.)

- The ego mediates among the id, the superego and the external world to find a balance between the id's primitive drives and the demands of an external reality.
- It is the mediator between the id and the superego, trying to enable the needs of both to be met.
- Ego occasionally cannot reconcile the demands of the id and the superego; develops a series of defense mechanisms to protect itself (and the total individual) from psychological destruction:
  - denial
  - displacement
  - intellectualization
  - fantasy
  - compensation
  - projection
  - rationalization
  - reaction formation
  - regression
  - repression
  - sublimation

- These defense mechanisms are not intentional or conscious; they protect the individual by hiding dangerous or threatening desires or impulses.

The superego is a component of the organized part of the personality and functions mostly unconsciously—for the most part, the individual is not consciously aware of the effect of the superego's mandates and prohibitions on his or her thoughts and behavior.

- Superego controls the individual's sense of right and wrong and guilt—the conscience.

- It works in contradiction to the id; while the id would have all of its desires met instantaneously and by any means, the superego will deny the satisfaction of all impulses that do not strictly conform to internalized social, moral, or other, codes.
- Superego helps the individual fit into society by making it act in socially acceptable ways.
- It is formed after the individual's birth and develops as the individual matures and attempts to achieve a place in society.



## Discussion Questions

1. What personal biases does Williams apparently reveal through his treatment of the characters Blanche and Stanley? How does he reveal these biases?
2. What discrepancies exist between Blanche's view of herself and
  - Stella's reaction to her?
  - Stanley's reaction to her?
  - Mitch's reaction to her?
3. What is the significance of Blanche's final descent into madness?

## Essays or Writing Assignments

1. In a well-developed essay, explore interactions of the three central characters—Stella, Stanley, and Blanche—in terms of the functioning of the id, ego, and superego. Do the three combine to form a psychologically healthy individual? Why or why not? Be certain to support all of your arguments with direct references to the text.
2. Write a well-reasoned and -developed essay in which you analyze Williams's use of music, sound, and visual effects to suggest characters' psychological states.

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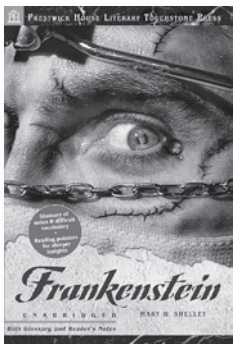
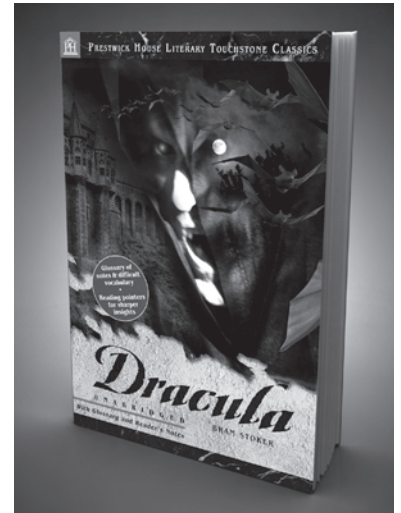
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