

A Streetcar Named Desire (Tennessee Williams, 1947)

Paper 2 Criterion A: Knowledge and understanding of the Part 3 works and their contexts (macro factors)

Genre

- drama: morality play or melodrama or tragedy
- written to be performed for an audience to see and hear in a public/social setting (theater)
- audience experience the play together and at the same time, which encourages immediate discussion (a social experience)
- readers must infer a lot of information from dialogue and stage directions as there is no direct avenue into the characters' heads

Themes

- the destructive power of desire
- the internal self vs. the external self / the struggle between illusion and reality
- the inability to cope with change

Cultural/Historical Context

After the American Civil War:

Much of the South lay in ruins when it surrendered in 1865. With its infrastructure and economy destroyed, the grandeur of the Southern plantations crumbled, represented by the decay of estates like Belle Reve. The landed elites' decadent way of life was doomed by defeat, spurring a nostalgic yearning for America's past.

After the Second World War:

- US experienced phenomenal economic growth
- US quickly modernized and urbanized, marked by advancements in industry and machinery
- US relaxed its immigration policies, allowing more foreigners in
- People believed in the American Dream

Williams' personal life:

- TW's mother was a typical Southern Belle who lost her high status after moving to a big city; she idealized her Southern past and influenced her children with such nostalgic memories.
- TW was unable to protect his sister when she was committed to a mental hospital and forced to undergo a pre-frontal lobotomy.
- Homosexuality was illegal in the US for most of TW's life; he struggled between his morality and his sexuality, and hated being a homosexual.
- TW believed he was dying of cancer in 1946; he obsessed over the physical ugliness of death and the inevitability of dying.

Playwright's Purpose

Matters of Publication

Matters of Reception

A Streetcar Named Desire (Tennessee Williams, 1947)

Paper 2 Criterion C: Understanding of the use and effects of stylistic features (micro factors)

<p>Setting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ a modernized American South in late 1940s, formerly a place of gentility and the landed elite▪ New Orleans, a raucous, cosmopolitan city▪ Elysian Fields, a mixed raced working class neighborhood where the streetcar named Desire runs▪ the Kowalskis' two-room apartment, which emphasizes Blanche's alienation and vulnerability	<p>Stage Directions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The houses in Elysian Fields are "<u>mostly white frame, weathered grey, with rickety outside stairs</u>", creating an atmosphere of decay▪ Polka music plays when Blanche recalls Allan's suicide and when she falls into fits of heightened mental and emotional instability▪ Menacing shadows and lurid reflections move like flames on the wall accompanied by the inhuman cries of the jungle to foreshadow Blanche's rape and banishment to the insane asylum▪ Stanley tears the paper lantern from the light bulb and extends it toward Blanche who cries out as if the lantern was herself▪ Stanley's fingers find the opening of Stella's blouse
<p>Characterization</p> <p>Blanche DuBois</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Her physical appearance is incongruous to the New Orleans setting; her white clothes are delicate and fluffy, resembling a moth▪ Causes young husband's suicide with her deliberate cruelty: "<u>I know! I know! You disgust me</u>"▪ Expelled from Laurel due to her promiscuity; fired from job for sleeping with a student▪ Has pedophilic tendencies: Kisses the young man who collects for <i>The Evening Star</i> and tells him, "<u>You make my mouth water</u>"▪ Takes long, hot baths to seek purification▪ Lies a lot: "<u>No, one's my limit</u>", "<u>...she's somewhat older than I</u>", "<u>I received a telegram from an old admirer of mine</u>", "<u>He returned with a box of roses to beg my forgiveness</u>"▪ Avoids strong light to hide her fading beauty; covers the light bulb with a paper lantern; cries out when Stanley tears it down as if in pain▪ Calls Stanley "<u>common</u>", "<u>bestial</u>", "<u>sub-human</u>", "<u>ape-like</u>", "<u>survivor of the stone age</u>"▪ Fantasizes about being rescued by Shep Huntleigh and hears Polka music and echoes in her head, indicating mental deterioration▪ Seeks marriage with Mitch; pretends to be "<u>prim and proper</u>" to deceive him; wears soiled and crumpled white evening gown, scuffed slippers, and rhinestown tiara after his rejection▪ Predicts she will die from eating an unwashed grape; imagines being dropped overboard in a clean white sack at noon in the blaze of summer▪ Banished to mental asylum; tells the doctor, "<u>Whoever you are – I have always depended on the kindness of strangers</u>" <p>Stella Kowalski</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Runs to Eunice's apartment when Stanley hits her, and then returns to make love to him because "<u>there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark – that sort of make everything else seem – unimportant</u>"▪ Loyal to Stanley; embraces him fiercely and with both arms after Blanche calls him "<u>common</u>"▪ Says about her new American life, "<u>I'm not in anything I want to get out of</u>"▪ Stops confronting Stanley and defending Blanche when her water breaks; changes her priority to the baby▪ Refuses to believe that Stanley has raped Blanche; banishes Blanche to the mental asylum in order to continue living with Stanley <p>Stanley Kowalski</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ "<u>the gaudy seed-bearer</u>" "<u>with animal joy in his being</u>" who walks around with the "<u>power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens</u>"▪ Son of Polish immigrants▪ Pulls Stella down off the "columns" of her Old South life▪ Rummages through Blanche's trunk without her permission, foreshadowing the forthcoming rape▪ Throws radio out the window, hits Stella, and then makes love to her afterwards▪ Investigates Blanche's past in Laurel and tells Mitch what he learns about her indecent way of life▪ Gives Blanche a bus ticket to Laurel so he and Stella can "<u>make noise in the night...and get the colored lights going with nobody's sister behind the curtains to hear us!</u>"▪ Destroys Blanche's pretenses, killing the illusions she hides behind: "<u>There isn't no millionaire!</u>", "<u>There isn't a goddam thing but imagination!</u>", "<u>Lies and conceit and tricks!</u>"▪ Rapes Blanche while Stella is in labor; declares, "<u>We've had this date with each other from the beginning!</u>"▪ Comforts Stella when Blanche departs by touching her body and making love to her <p>Mitch</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Lives with his mother who is ill and will soon die▪ Initially charmed by Blanche; helps her hang the paper lantern over the light bulb and denies that she is an old maid▪ Rejects marriage with Blanche, declaring, "<u>You're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother</u>"▪ Attempts to rape Blanche	
<p>Foil</p> <p>Blanche & Stella</p> <p>Blanche fails to cope with the way America has changed after the Civil War and WWII while Stella adapts quickly and well by marrying Stanley and starting a new life with him in New Orleans. Both sisters are, however, victims of desire – Blanche falls into great ruin when her promiscuity and pedophilia get out of hand, and Stella falls into great remorse when she betrays her sister for sexual gratification with Stanley. The key difference is that Stella finds a way to survive in a new America while Blanche is abandoned and left to die.</p>	<p>Symbolism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ streetcar named Desire = the fateful and destructive force of one's human nature▪ Blanche's trunk: Blanche's destitution▪ light bulb = reality; the truth▪ paper lantern = Blanche's pretenses; the person she pretends to be▪ Polka music = Allan Grey's suicide; Blanche's panic and mental decline
<p>Allusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Elysian Fields = in Greek mythology, a paradise where heroes and great mortals "live" after death	<p>Resolution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Stella sends Blanche to a mental asylum where she dies, metaphorically▪ Stella and Stanley make love, indicating that Stella has betrayed her sister for sexual gratification