Following the success of The Glass Menagerie, Williams began work on a story about the drama surrounding the presence of two women at a men's poker night. The story eventually evolved into A Streetcar Named Desire, a work that became one of Tennessee Williams's best-known and best-loved plays. After the success of its original Broadway run from 1947 to 1949, A Streetcar Named Desire was awarded a Pulitzer Prize and a New York Drama Critics' Circle award for Best Play. Only a few years later, Streetcar had secured its place in the American pop culture consciousness, largely due to the release of Elia Kazan's 1951 film adaptation of the play, which included dynamic and unforgettable performances by Marlon Brando as Stanley Kowalski and Vivien Leigh as Blanche DuBois. Kazan's adaptation of A Streetcar Named Desire, which presented a unique vision of Williams's story, struck a chord with viewers. Audiences committed to memory the play's most famous lines and the intense dramatic conflict between Stanley and Blanche as it was reflected onscreen. More than 50 years later, Kazan's film continues to be cited regularly on lists of the best films of all time.

While there is no doubt that Kazan's film helped fuel the success of Williams's work in the popular mainstream by projecting it to a larger audience, the powerful performances and the overwhelming appeal of this adaptation put forth a challenge for those writing about the play. Readers and writers may, consciously or unconsciously, depend on Kazan's vision of the play in their own search for information about the work. This brings to light a problem for those writing about any literary works that have popular film adaptations—namely, the pitfall of drawing ideas from a singular interpretation of the work rather than from an open examination of the original text. An exploration of Kazan's own interpretation of the play or an analysis of his vision of specific individual elements, such as the presentation of the characters or treatment of plot, could certainly serve as interesting essay topics, but for those opting to write about topics not directly related to Kazan's adaptation, having a predetermined notion of the play and the characters means that writers will need to unlearn what they think they know about the play. In fact, choosing to write about Kazan's interpretation of the text would also require the formation of your own opinions of the original text so that you can compare and contrast the two, citing important similarities or differences. In either of these scenarios, it will be necessary to resist the urge to work off the ideas and vision presented in the famous film and focus on your own interpretation of the text.

Relying too heavily on popular adaptations of a text presents a problem—namely, that the creator of a popular adaptation may not necessarily have been faithful to the author's own vision. Those who are familiar with both the reading version of A Streetcar Named Desire and Kazan's film may have already recognized this problem, noticing that references to Blanche's husband as a homosexual are omitted in the film. As we witness in Kazan's work, there is always the possibility that censorship of some kind may have hindered accurate representation of the work, and even in cases where censorship is not a concern, someone else's vision of the play may simply differ greatly from the author's own view for any number of reasons.

Reconciling the problem of censorship and resisting the urge to rely on the personal choices of a single interpreter are not the only potential stumbling blocks for those writing about A Streetcar Named Desire. Williams's literary tactics present their own challenge. In A Streetcar Named Desire, as in many of his other works, Williams makes a habit of building up a particular image and then breaking it down, allowing him to keep some control over our assumptions and presuppositions. Consider the text as a whole. A close consideration of the full text reveals information that gives us a deeper understanding of the themes and characters. In fact, Williams's build up–break down technique allows us access to the inner selves of the characters. Take a look at the paragraphs that introduce us to Stanley and Blanche. First, Stanley: "Two men come around the corner, Stanley Kowalski and Mitch. They are about twenty-eight or thirty years old, roughly dressed in blue denim work clothes. Stanley carries his bowling jacket and a red-stained package from a butcher's" (470). From this single introductory paragraph, we can place Stanley within the working class. He is young. His accessories—a bowling jacket and a package of meat—enhance this view of Stanley as a macho working man. They also indicate his love of sport and signal his overt sexuality, which is revealed to us shortly. Our introduction to Blanche presents an equally vivid picture:

Two men come around the corner, Stanley Kowalski and Mitch. They are about twenty-eight or thirty years old, roughly dressed in blue denim work clothes. Stanley carries his bowling jacket and a red-stained package from a butcher's.
Blanche comes around the corner, carrying a valise. She looks at a slip of paper, then at the building, then again at the slip and again at the building. Her expression is one of shocked disbelief. Her appearance is incongruous to this setting. She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district. (471)

From this paragraph we see that Blanche is equated with the color white; she seems to represent a kind of purity. Her clothes and jewelry indicate that she is well-off, and the references to her being dressed for a special occasion indicate that she is socially adjusted.

While there is some truth in both of these introductions, a thorough examination of the text provides the warning that we cannot base our opinions of the characters on these descriptions alone or on any singular description for that matter. There is more to the story than what is at the surface, and the play poses the additional challenge of presenting contrasting points of view. Stanley, who seems to be a simple and straightforward character, is actually a deeply complex character. His image as an animal and a brute can be, and has been, challenged by scholars and critics. In Stanley's case, you might consider the part of the play where a contrite Stanley is compared to a "baying hound" (502), calling out his wife's name in the streets. Some might see this as an indication of a more human side of Stanley, a vulnerable and loving side. Certainly some contemporary critics have chosen to work from this viewpoint, supporting a more sympathetic, or at least empathetic, view of Stanley. The same can be said for Blanche. Blanche is presented to us in a manner similar to a slowly unraveling ball of tangled yarn. In this case there is less work to do, for it is Williams himself who challenges the initial depiction of Blanche. In fact, Williams begins to break down our preconceptions of Blanche immediately, concluding his introduction of the character with the following observations: "Her delicate beauty must avoid strong light. There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth" (471). Our preconceptions of Blanche as a pure lady cannot survive this comparison to an insect that is either found among decaying items or flitting around in the night. Therefore, as we can see from these two examples, just as readers should not rely on a single adaptation or interpretation of the text for information, readers must also be careful not to cling too tightly to any single passage or any preconceptions that the text evokes. An analysis of this single tactic could serve as a valuable essay topic. Why would Williams want to present us with a certain image and then break down that image? What does this tell us about stereotypes and simple classification?

Similarly, many scholars and critics choose to write about the theme of the death of the Old South and the rise of a coarse industrial class in A Streetcar Named Desire. It is easy to match up Stanley and Blanche as archetypes of these particular societies. And yet, upon full consideration of the supporting details, writers may begin to see that these characters also resist these archetypes in many ways. Certainly, there is scholarship that extends in both directions. For instance, while Stanley is presented as crass and brutish, contemporary critics have proposed that Stanley is just as much a victim of his circumstances as Blanche, and Williams himself seems to suggest that Blanche's downfall cannot be linked solely to her exposure to Stanley. Williams presents Blanche as a character who, like the others, is equipped with her own flaws. One could argue then that she is capable of contributing to her own demise without Stanley's help. This shows how writing about a very common theme of the text is not a problem, so long as you have fresh observations to contribute about the subject.

If you are particularly interested in Kazan's film adaptation, it could be interesting to analyze the most famous lines of the play. What does Stanley's primal cry of his wife's name and Blanche's final admission of her dependence "on the kindness of strangers" tell us about each of these characters? For instance, Stanley's comparison to a "baying hound" (502) perpetuates the idea of him as animalistic, but how else could this be construed? Some might find this particular gesture to symbolize his true connection with Stella, a deeper connection that we are not able to see elsewhere. Others might see it as an indication of Stanley's desperation and, therefore, an indication of his vulnerability. Consider how these bits of dialogue transcend the characters who give voice to them and how they take on a universal meaning. What is it that has made these lines so memorable when they were translated on-screen?

A Streetcar Named Desire presents other challenges for writers to consider as well. In the preceding chapter, we discussed the challenge of minimalistic plots as evidenced in The Glass Menagerie and many other modern works of literature. A Streetcar Named Desire may present the opposite problem. The play is full of dramatic action, and readers can easily become caught up in the overall action of the play, leading to the pitfall of missing the more subtle elements of the work. Similarly, Streetcar has some themes that can dominate the play because of their prominence. For instance, the most prominent subject of the play seems to be desire, as evidenced by the very title of the work. A good writer should be able to resist making obvious observations about desire, considering instead how this prominent theme relates to broader themes such as love, the demise of romance, the effects of a changing society, and even the relationship between desire and the death of the Old South.
and death. If you recall these suggestions to resist relying on any single popular interpretation of the text and to reach beyond the most obvious details of the play, you will be able to develop your own original ideas about the work, which will result in a strong and engaging essay.

**Topics and Strategies**

In the sections that follow, you will find a variety of suggested topics accompanied by questions and observations to assist you in the task of writing successfully about *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Remember that this is not a comprehensive list of topics, and the statements and questions that appear after each suggested topic are merely a guide to help spark your own ideas about the work. A successful paper will present a strong thesis based upon your own original ideas and will be supported by relevant examples resulting from close readings of the text. A wide variety of interpretations will be possible as you consider each topic. Use the strategic questions and observations to stimulate your own thoughts about the text and to assist you in developing a strong thesis. Remember to read through the text more than once, making note of those elements of the text that support your argument. It will be equally important to make note of those elements that contradict your thesis, as this will help you to refine your argument and create a stronger case.

**Themes**

In considering the themes presented in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as discussed above, the most obvious is undoubtedly the powerful and destructive nature of uncontrolled desire. It is referenced in the work's title and is repeated as a motif throughout the play. It is evident in symbols such as the streetcar and the fallen Belle Reve and is reflected in each of the main characters, who function as examples of the impact of the destructive nature of desire. Williams makes it impossible to ignore the ruling force of Stanley and Stella's relationship, with scenes that function as tongue-in-cheek metaphors, such as the scene wherein Stanley throws his package of meat at Stella and Stella gleefully accepts it. Even Blanche, who seems at first to represent a kind of purity, is deeply affected by her own desires and is battered by the uncontrolled desires of those around her—her family, who squandered their estate, and her husband, whom she caught having a homosexual affair. While desire is certainly a key theme of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, it is important not to become so entangled in this one subject that you miss out on the other major themes of the work. As a matter of fact, an examination of Williams's presentation of desire can lead us to other significant themes such as love and relationships, loneliness, sexuality, need and reliance, and the widespread effects of a changing society, to name only a few.

**Sample Topics:**

1. **Desire:** What kind of commentary does the play ultimately make about desire? How are each of the characters driven by desire and what effect does this have on them?

   This topic could be addressed from many different viewpoints. Each of the characters in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is deeply affected by desire. You might consider how desire affects a single character or how it affects all of the main characters, more generally. Consider Stella and Stanley's relationship, and consider Blanche's inability to rein in her desires and its part in her ruination. You might choose to focus on how Williams uses symbolism to create a discourse about desire. As suggested above, try to consider desire as more than a sexual force. How is desire reflected in other variations and what is Williams trying to say about the nature and effect of desire? Is it inherently a bad thing?

2. **Illusion and reality:** Throughout the play Blanche, in particular, seems most incapable of distinguishing illusion from reality. Ultimately, at the conclusion of the play, it becomes clear that the two are, for her, blurred together. Why is this so? What does it tell us about Blanche and about the larger themes of the play?

   While it may be useful to begin by explaining how Williams presents Blanche as divorced from reality, remember not to simply present a list of examples. The methods Williams employs, such as his use of symbolism and character development, are relevant, but use the text to examine why Blanche chooses illusion over reality. Or is it a choice at all? It will be helpful to consider Blanche's various roles—sister, wife, schoolteacher, and southern belle. How do these roles contribute to our understanding of Blanche's separation from reality? Consider why Williams might have created a character like Blanche. What did he hope we would learn from Blanche?
Another interesting way to approach this topic might be to compare Blanche with characters from Williams's other works, such as Laura or Amanda from The Glass Menagerie. In terms of their inability to separate reality and fantasy, what do the characters share in common and how does Williams reveal this? Does he use the same method or methods to convey this in both texts?

**Character**

_A Streetcar Named Desire_ presents us with two of the most memorable and dynamic characters in the history of American theater—Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski. As noted above, there remain few people who are not familiar with Marlon Brando's performance as Stanley and Vivien Leigh's portrayal of Blanche in Elia Kazan's 1951 film adaptation of the play. At first glance, these characters seem diametrically opposed, but by the play's end, one could say that Williams has united the characters through their flaws and their basic human-ness. Comparing or contrasting these characters could lead to interesting insights about the characters and the themes of the play, but while these two characters often steal the limelight, there is much to be learned from the other characters such as Stella, Mitch, and even the vendors selling tamales and flowers for the dead who appear intermittently throughout the play. Like _The Glass Menagerie_, _A Streetcar Named Desire_ also utilizes absentee characters such as the DuBois ancestors and Blanche's deceased husband, characters who are revealed only through memory to give us deeper insight into the inner selves of the primary characters. Any of these topics could provide you with the basis for a good essay.

**Sample Topics:**

1. **Blanche:** Analyze and evaluate this character.
   
   Critics continue to present varied interpretations of Blanche. You might choose to develop your own analysis of Blanche based on your interpretation of the text, or you might choose to analyze a common portrayal of her, such as Vivian Leigh's portrayal of Blanche in Elia Kazan's film adaptation of the play. You might even compare or contrast multiple portrayals of Blanche. What does Blanche symbolize? Why is she such an important and memorable character? Remember to consider all elements of her character. Do not overlook more subtle elements such as the meaning of her name.

2. **The relationship of Stella and Stanley:** Analyze and evaluate the relationship of Stella and Stanley. What does it tell us about modern society and relationships? And about love? What impact did this depiction have on models of romance in literature?
   
   At the time Williams wrote _A Streetcar Named Desire_, the relationship of Stella and Stanley was somewhat unique in literature, for it challenged conventional notions of love and romance and focused on a primal magnetism not traditionally central to classic literature. What does the relationship of the two tell us about each character? And about relationships as a whole? Is their relationship a product of the society that they live in? Or does it reveal something more basic about human nature that simply was overlooked or censored previously? Perhaps you might consider the effect of the presentation of this kind of relationship in literature and film at the time it made its debut. In this case you would need to compare it to other examples of relationships and romance in literature.
   
   If you disagree with the idea that the relationship of Stanley and Stella serves as an example of a new model of romance in literature, you will need to support this assertion by aligning it with similar examples of romance and relationships in other texts. How can works like Shakespeare's _Romeo and Juliet_ support your assertion? Once you have presented your argument, you will want to conclude with some thoughts on the subject of why writers continue to present this vision of romance and relationships in literature. Are Williams and the other authors you referenced promoting the Stella-and-Stanley model as a statement of reality that dismisses fantastical notions of love? Or are they trying to illuminate the problems with this model of "love"? If you believe they are trying to illuminate problems with this model, discuss where the problem lies.

3. **Stanley as the antithesis of the chivalric male:** Many classic works of literature build their story around a male who functions symbolically as a kind of chivalric knight, either literally or symbolically. In _A Streetcar Named Desire_, Williams challenged this notion through the creation of Stanley Kowalski. Why is Williams's presentation of the male protagonist (or antagonist, as the case may be) significant?
You will probably want to begin by explaining what is meant by the idea of a chivalric knight. Give some definition to the term and use examples from other works of literature to back up your assertion that it is indeed a traditional view of the male in literature predating Williams's work. Next you will need to build your case by explaining how Stanley is the antithesis of the traditional male character. How do his appearance, gestures, and manner of speaking support this notion? Finally, consider why Williams would prefer to include a character like Stanley in the play? What is to be gained by abandoning traditional notions of the male character in literature? You might want to conclude by making some larger observations about the way that we are to perceive Stanley. Did Williams mean for us to see Stanley as an animal and a brute? Or is it possible to sympathize with his character, or at least to understand him? You might opt to dispute the notion of Stanley as the antithesis of the chivalric knight.

4. Characterization of the working class: Consider the cast of characters as a whole. Was Williams trying to create a portrait of the working class? If so, do you believe he was successful?

If you have chosen to write about this topic, you may want to first refer to some literature about the working class in America following the Industrial Revolution. You will need to have an understanding of what life was like for members of this class in urban areas during the 1940s. What would the experience of being a member of the lower working class have been like? Do Williams's characters represent this accurately? Consider also how the diversity of the cast reflects societal changes of the day. Why would Williams have wanted to create a portrait of the working class? This topic would allow you to consider if Williams's work can be considered a social tool or even a work of protest. If you believe it does fall under this classification, compare it to some other works of protest. How do the means the authors use compare and how do they differ? How do they share a common purpose?

History and Context

Like The Glass Menagerie and many of Williams's other works, A Streetcar Named Desire presents a portrait of an important time in American history, when the economic landscape was rapidly evolving, shifting from an agrarian culture to an industrial one. Along with changes in the economy came major changes in the daily life of those struggling to make a living. The urban society was largely formed as a result of industrialization, and the composition of populations shifted as people migrated to these urban centers to find work. The genteel ways associated with southern plantation life seemed to be fading away in favor of the rough ways associated with the day-to-day realities associated with the drive for industrial progress.

The setting and time period that Williams utilizes—a real-life avenue in a poor section of New Orleans in the 1940s—allowed Williams to deal with a myriad of important issues, including the threat of the extinction of American romance and tradition and the need for the preservation of ideals. In fact, the play, in its presentation of a view of the life of the working class and the confrontation of characters like Blanche and Stanley, allows us to question what is meant by progress and how it can be defined. Blanche, who initially appears to be a much more highly evolved human being than Stanley, is ultimately cast in a different light, and this discrepancy raises the question of what is better. Williams chooses to set his characters on a real street in a poor section of New Orleans. The streetcars were also taken from an existing streetcar line. A writer might choose to discuss the impact of Williams utilizing a real-life setting rather than a fictional one. How does this affect our interpretation of the work? Would our perception be different if the setting was fictional?

The condition of Blanche presents another interesting topic that appears throughout Williams's entire body of work, which is the prevalence of diagnoses of mental disorders in women at the turn of the century. This was a very important matter for Williams as his own sister, Rose, was institutionalized and later fully incapacitated by a lobotomy. The prevalence of the idea of hysteria and neuroses as a female affliction is echoed in Williams's other plays such as The Glass Menagerie and Summer and Smoke, but it is the example of Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire that is perhaps most prominent in the public consciousness. Consider what Williams is saying about this issue—is he confirming it or disputing it?

Sample Topic:

1. The death of the Old South: What message does A Streetcar Named Desire give us about the death of the Old South?
Critics have approached this topic from many different standpoints. While there is some consensus that Williams was concerned with creating a portrait of the Old South compared to the new industrial society, do not fall into the trap of simply announcing this in your paper. First you will want to define the Old South and present a picture of the culture associated with it and then discuss how this society changed as a result of industrialization. Consider why this subject is relevant. How do the formal elements of the play reflect this theme and reveal information about this subject? Is Williams actually saying that industrialism caused the downfall of genteel culture?

Philosophy and Ideas

While *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a dynamic, action-packed play, the work is also able to serve as a catalyst, allowing audience members to consider deeper issues such as the nature of truth, the definition of reality, and our confrontation with it. Considering any of these topics will require you to look beyond the surface of the play, examining the inner lives of the characters, the symbolism, and other formal elements.

Sample Topics:

1. **The interior life of characters:** How does the play create a sense of the interior life of the characters and what does this reveal to us? How does this ability to access the inner selves of the characters shape our perception of them and, subsequently, our perception of the play at large?

   You might consider how Williams used his set and the oscillation between interiors and exteriors to show the inner workings of the characters while creating the impression of a voyeuristic view. Consider also how Williams uses other symbols to demonstrate the true nature of the characters and their psychological condition.

2. **Truth:** Each character addresses truth in a different way. What does the play tell us about the nature of truth?

   Stanley claims to seek out truth while Stella disregards it, and Blanche hides from the truth. While you will need to provide examples of how we know this about each character, you will also want to discuss the motivations behind their ability or inability to deal with truth. Why would Williams want to present three different views of the confrontation of reality or the failure to confront reality?

3. **Self-awareness:** How self-aware are the major characters in this play?

   You may want to narrow down this topic by discussing the self-awareness of one character, or you might choose to compare and contrast the self-awareness of more than one character. Consider how well the characters seem to know themselves. Are they aware of their own flaws? Or are their flaws primarily recognized by other characters?

Form and Genre

The sections above suggested that it might be interesting to consider Stanley as the antithesis of the chivalric knight in literature and to examine Stella and Stanley's relationship as a new model for romance in literature. When considering genre and form in the context of the play, one might consider how these characterizations contribute to the notion of the play as an example of a subverted romance.

Sample Topics:

1. **Subverted romance:** How does the play function as a subverted romance? And what message does this send about modern society? How does this idea of the subverted romance relate to larger themes about romance in American culture?

   These questions will require you to consider romance not only as a counterpart of love but also as cultural phenomenon. Begin by considering how romances are typically presented in literature and in film. What
usually happens to the characters? How do the romances of Stella and Stanley and Blanche and her husband
or Blanche and her other suitors compare to traditional depictions of romance? Are they similar or do they
present another model of failed or subverted romance? If so, why is this significant? Consider the social
implications. Do the characters' backgrounds affect their romances? Explain how, using examples from the
text to back up your assertions.

2. Romanticism: How does Williams's work function as an example of romanticism?

First you will need to refer to some works that give an overview of the romantic movement. You might begin
by defining romanticism in your essay. Some information with respect to its origins will be necessary. Next
consider how A Streetcar Named Desire functions as a romantic work. Compare elements of the text to some
other romantic works. What do they share in common? How are they united in purpose? Do they share
similar themes or character types?
between Williams's works. For instance, how does the use of music in *A Streetcar Named Desire* relate to the use of music in *The Glass Menagerie*?

5. **Bathing:** Why does Williams choose to have Blanche bathing or speaking of bathing so frequently? What symbolic significance might this action have?

Consider each instance where Blanche talks about bathing or is revealed to actually be in the bathtub or off freshening up. Is her preoccupation with bathing cultural—a reference to her manners as a lady? Or should it be accepted as an obsession with a deeper meaning? What else does bathing symbolize?

**Compare and Contrast Essays**

In the case of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, comparing and contrasting elements of the work will serve as a very informative process. You could compare the text to a film version of the play, two or more characters in the play, or an element that is used in similar (or different) contexts within the course of the play. These are only a few of the options that are available to you. Be sure to conclude your essay by explaining why any similarities or differences are significant. Your essay should be more than a simple list of what the works share in common or how they differ.

**Sample Topics:**

1. **The text and the film:** Compare or contrast the reading version of the play with Elia Kazan's famous film adaptation.

Remember that you do not want to simply provide a list of how the text and the film compare or differ, although that will comprise a major portion of your essay. This explanation of similarities and differences should lead to a larger, more insightful conclusion. If you choose to compare the two, consider how Elia Kazan maintained Williams's vision of the play. If you decide to contrast the two versions, ask yourself not just what is different but why it is different. Why did Elia Kazan choose to make the changes that are evident in the film? Do you believe that they were personal choices or were they dictated by societal constraints and censorship? Or are they a mix of both? Discuss. This might lead you to a larger conversation about censorship issues in literature or about the variation of interpretation of works.

2. **Stella and Blanche:** Compare and contrast these two characters.

Although Stella and Blanche are sisters, they are very different. Stella seems to have had no problem assimilating to urban life, while Blanche is shocked by it and seems incapable of adapting. The characters also, however, have much in common. Both are greatly impacted by their inability to rein in their desires. Why is this important? You will also wish to compare the fates of the two characters.

3. **Stanley and Blanche:** Compare and contrast these two characters.

Countless scholars and critics have explored the dynamic interaction between Stanley and Blanche, so begin by considering how your interpretation of the text can bring something new or insightful to this dialogue. You might choose to discuss the differences between the characters and focus on the clash between them, or you might choose to discuss what the characters share in common, but avoid simply making a list of similarities or differences. The focus of your essay should be on why these similarities or differences are important.

**Further Information**


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