

# A Level English Literature At The Blue Coat School



## Introduction to *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

In this pack you will find a range of resources that will help to introduce you to one of your first set texts. Understanding the life of Tennessee Williams, the Southern Gothic tradition and the culture of New Orleans is instrumental in deconstructing this text. Make sure you research the key vocabulary on the next page as these will be referred to throughout this pack and your studies.

## Key Vocabulary

Research the following terms to help you as you progress through the play.

Antebellum South:

Southern Gothic:

Cosmopolitan:

Southern Belle:

Plastic Theatre:

Psychological drama:

Streetcar:

Polka:

Southern gentry:

Immigration and Industrialisation in the U.S:



**Task One:** Watch the video [here](#) and fill in the appropriate sections of the knowledge organiser that can be found at the back of this document. (You will continue to add to this as you move through the pack). If you have not yet started to research or read the play, you can find a (very) brief explanation of the plot and themes [here](#).



**Task Two:** Listen to the podcast about Tennessee Williams' life [here](#). Add any interesting information you discover to your knowledge organiser.



**Task Three:** Read through the article about New Orleans on page four. Add any new learning to your knowledge organiser. If you really want to get a feel for the city and its culture whilst you read, you can listen to some jazz music [here](#). You can also watch [this video](#) to see what New Orleans was like at the time of Williams' writing.



**Task Four:** Study the features of Southern Gothic Literature [here](#). Again, add any of your findings to your knowledge organiser. Once you have done this, read the excerpt from *Beloved* by Toni Morrison on page 7. What features of the genre can you see?



**Task Five:** Now you can watch the play following [this](#) link. Can you see all of the influences you have learned about within the play?

## New Orleans in *A Streetcar Named Desire* – Its Significance and Symbolism

Salima Abbasi Freeman's account of the setting for Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* shows how an understanding of its history, changing population and atmosphere are at the heart of the presentation of the characters and what they represent.

When Blanche DuBois arrives in the French Quarter of New Orleans, carrying a valise and dressed, 'as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party', she could not be more out of place. Williams' stage direction that Blanche's 'appearance is incongruous to this setting' understates her inability to adapt, not only to her circumstances, but to the bustling and unique world of New Orleans itself.

### Colonial New Orleans

Founded by the French in 1718, New Orleans developed around the French Quarter or 'Vieux Carré', meaning 'Old Square'. Being one of the oldest (and thus, most established) parts of the city, the French Quarter is at the heart of New Orleans and of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It has, in Williams' words, a 'spirit and life' of its own and the tinny sound of the 'blue piano', heard everywhere in this neighbourhood, 'expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here'. Historically, New Orleans has had many cultural influences. The French ceded it to the Spanish for forty years in 1763 and, shortly after its return to the French, it was sold to the United States, in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. There would have been many French and Spanish colonial buildings but most of these were destroyed in fires in 1788 and 1794 – it is likely, then, that most of the architecture which Blanche encounters would date from American rule.

Nonetheless, the buildings which create the 'atmosphere of decay', in the opening scene of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, are, unmistakably, colonial in style. These are 'mostly white frame, weathered grey' houses with 'quaintly ornamented gables'. These suggest French colonial style and are outmoded, much like the way of life of the wealthy plantation owners of the Southern states of America. It is significant that Williams draws attention to these edifices as they correspond to the social background of Blanche and Stella. Whatever sentimentality the buildings may evoke in an observer – and Williams admitted to longing for the lost genteel life of the South – they must now adapt to the world that they are in and serve as apartment blocks for working people. If they do not adapt – and an analogy can be drawn with Blanche – they are useless and an obstruction to others.

### The Experience of the Town

Williams moved to New Orleans at the age of 28, ready to immerse himself in the cultural life of the city. He took on, permanently, his college nickname of 'Tennessee', given to him because of his Southern accent and the state in which his father was born. From his apartment overlooking the French Quarter, he was perfectly placed to take in the blend of sounds, sights and smells that create the setting for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The shouting of street vendors, selling tamales and flowers, the whooping of men returning from a hard day's work, the chatting of women as they go about their chores and the frequent and violent quarrelling of couples, all blend into a raucous backdrop of blues and jazz for which New Orleans is famous.

Williams offers a sensual appreciation of the Quarter as we 'almost feel the warm breath of the brown river' and smell, faintly, 'bananas and coffee'. The sky is 'a peculiarly tender blue',

suggesting a vulnerability amidst the chaos, along with 'a kind of lyricism'. Williams' use of expressionism – or 'poetic realism' as he called it – allows him to create a whole experience of life in the city, based around what is seen, heard, smelt and evoked as much as what is played out between the characters. There may be challenges in staging all of this for an audience but Williams brings this deep appreciation of the character of New Orleans to those who read the script.

### Music and Popular Culture

It is particularly telling that Blanche, who prides herself on her sensitivity and sense of culture, never acknowledges the atmosphere of the neighbourhood, aside from calling it a 'horrible place'. New Orleans, in the late nineteenth century, was a hub for artists and writers, drawn to cheap rents and the 'raffish charm' that Williams describes. Even in 1947, there was enough to inspire an artistic temperament. Music, in New Orleans, was a symbol of communication and integration, with the city producing such jazz legends as Louis Armstrong. Blanche, however, never comments on the music that is playing 'always just around the corner', hearing instead the polka from within her own mind and her troubled past. Her eyes and ears are closed to the reality of New Orleans and the popular culture of her sister's new home. Doggedly holding onto her own cultural references – operas, dances and poetry – she does not take the opportunity to embrace the modern New Orleans, where 'high culture' is incongruous and irrelevant. Blanche demonstrates a snobbery that seems to impress Mitch but grates with Stanley and, in her rejection of the reality of this new world, we see a wider rejection of reality and an attempt to hold onto what is no longer of value.

### World War II

The Second World War brought thousands of servicemen and new workers to New Orleans, adding to the already diverse culture of the city. Stanley is one of these many 'foreigners' in Blanche's eyes. People of many origins – Polish, Irish, Dutch and Italian, to name a few – became inhabitants of New Orleans alongside the European and African-American populations. When Blanche insists on calling Stanley a 'Polack', she demonstrates a rejection of the very nature of this unique city, focusing on difference rather than unity. Stanley, who has fought for his country, is proud to be American. He sees his place in society threatened by Blanche, whose values grate with the ideal of the 'American Dream', which promised that success is attainable through effort and hard work, rather than being dependent on social connections and privilege.

### Stella – A Bridge

The bridge, perhaps, between the old Southern way of life and the modern New Orleans, is Stella. Although she does not specifically acknowledge, or show appreciation for, the popular culture of New Orleans, she is very much part of her neighbourhood and relies on a support network that exists between the people there. Her neighbours know of her privileged past and of Belle Reve, indicating that she has not reinvented herself in order to fit in. The city does not judge her, as diversity is the essence of this place. She is as comfortable laughing 'breathlessly' on the balcony, when Stanley 'heaves the package [of meat] at her' as she is enjoying a show and dinner at Gallatoire's, the upmarket, jackets-only restaurant in the French Quarter, where Williams himself was a regular. For Stella, the two threads of her life – sophisticated past and down-to-earth present – can exist 'contrapuntally', a musical term used in the play.

### Blanche – An Outsider

If the life of New Orleans represents the reality of the play, Blanche's detachment from it underlines the illusion in which she has trapped herself. To survive in New Orleans, one must accept it for what it is. Unwilling to wake from the beautiful dream of Belle Reve and

her lost past, she rejects the truth of her life without money, status or privilege. These Southern 'values' are incongruous to New Orleans and its inhabitants. Unwilling to embrace the modern world and to attach any value to the vibrancy and 'spirit of the life' of New Orleans, Blanche seems to pitch herself against her surroundings, so that the strains of jazz and blues and the voices of the people of the city, are seen to compete incessantly with her internal narrative. If she had understood the impossibility of reconstructing Belle Reve in New Orleans, physically or mentally, Blanche's experiences may have been very different and *A Streetcar Named Desire* would have been a very different play.

## Excerpt from *Beloved* by Toni Morrison

*Toni Morrison's magnificent Pulitzer Prize-winning work—first published in 1987—brought the wrenching experience of slavery into the literature of our time, enlarging our comprehension of America's original sin. Set in post-Civil War Ohio, it is the story of Sethe, an escaped slave who has lost a husband and buried a child; who has withstood savagery and not gone mad. Sethe, who now lives in a small house on the edge of town with her daughter, Denver, her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, and a disturbing, mesmerizing apparition who calls herself Beloved.*

124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old--as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny band prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy waited to see more; another kettleful of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the doorsill. Nor did they wait for one of the relief periods: the weeks, months even, when nothing was disturbed. No. Each one fled at once--the moment the house committed what was for him the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time. Within two months, in the dead of winter, leaving their grandmother, Baby Suggs; Sethe, their mother; and their little sister, Denver, all by themselves in the gray and white house on Bluestone Road. It didn't have a number then, because Cincinnati didn't stretch that far. In fact, Ohio had been calling itself a state only seventy years when first one brother and then the next stuffed quilt packing into his hat, snatched up his shoes, and crept away from the lively spite the house felt for them.

Baby Suggs didn't even raise her head. From her sickbed she heard them go but that wasn't the reason she lay still. It was a wonder to her that her grandsons had taken so long to realize that every house wasn't like the one on Bluestone Road. Suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead, she couldn't get interested in leaving life or living it, let alone the fright of two creeping-off boys. Her past had been like her present--intolerable--and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left her for pondering color.

"Bring a little lavender in, if you got any. Pink, if you don't."

And Sethe would oblige her with anything from fabric to her own tongue. Winter in Ohio was especially rough if you had an appetite for color. Sky provided the only drama, and counting on a Cincinnati horizon for life's principal joy was reckless indeed. So Sethe and the girl Denver did what they could, and what the house permitted, for her. Together they waged a perfunctory battle against the outrageous behavior of that place; against turned-over slop jars, smacks on the behind, and gusts of sour air. For they understood the source of the outrage as well as they knew the source of light.

Baby Suggs died shortly after the brothers left, with no interest whatsoever in their leave-taking or hers, and right afterward Sethe and Denver decided to end the persecution by calling forth the ghost that tried them so. Perhaps a conversation, they thought, an exchange of views or something would help. So they held hands and said, "Come on. Come on. You may as well just come on."

The sideboard took a step forward but nothing else did.

"Grandma Baby must be stopping it," said Denver. She was ten and still mad at Baby Suggs for dying.

Sethe opened her eyes. "I doubt that," she said.

"Then why don't it come?"

"You forgetting how little it is," said her mother. "She wasn't even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even."

"Maybe she don't want to understand," said Denver.

"Maybe. But if she'd only come, I could make it clear to her." Sethe released her daughter's hand and together they pushed the sideboard back against the wall. Outside a driver whipped his horse into the gallop local people felt necessary when they passed 124.

"For a baby she throws a powerful spell," said Denver.

"No more powerful than the way I loved her," Sethe answered and there it was again. The welcoming cool of unchiseled headstones; the one she selected to lean against on tiptoe, her knees wide open as any grave. Pink as a fingernail it was, and sprinkled with glittering chips. Ten minutes, he said. You got ten minutes I'll do it for free.

Ten minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten "Dearly" too? She had not thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible--that for twenty minutes, a half hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral (and all there was to say, surely) engraved on her baby's headstone: Dearly Beloved. But what she got, settled for, was the one word that mattered. She thought it would be enough, rutting among the headstones with the engraver, his young son looking on, the anger in his face so old; the appetite in it quite new. That should certainly be enough. Enough to answer one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust.

Counting on the stillness of her own soul, she had forgotten the other one: the soul of her baby girl. Who would have thought that a little old baby could harbor so much rage? Rutting among the stones under the eyes of the engraver's son was not enough. Not only did she have to live out her years in a house palsied by the baby's fury at having its throat cut, but those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil.

"We could move," she suggested once to her mother-in-law.

"What'd be the point?" asked Baby Suggs. "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back in here? or yours? Don't talk to me. You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don't you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody's house into evil." Baby Suggs rubbed her eyebrows. "My firstborn. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember."

"That's all you let yourself remember," Sethe had told her, but she was down to one herself--one alive, that is--the boys chased off by the dead one, and her memory of Buglar was fading fast. Howard at least had a head shape nobody could forget. As for the rest, she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious. She might be hurrying across a field, running practically, to get to the pump quickly and rinse the chamomile sap from her legs. Nothing else would be in her mind. The picture of the men coming to nurse her was as lifeless as the nerves in her back where the skin buckled like a washboard. Nor was there the faintest scent of ink or the cherry gum and oak bark from which it was made. Nothing. Just the breeze cooling her face as she rushed toward water. And then sopping the chamomile

away with pump water and rags, her mind fixed on getting every last bit of sap off--on her carelessness in taking a shortcut across the field just to save a half mile, and not noticing how high the weeds had grown until the itching was all the way to her knees. Then something. The splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her--remembering the wonderful southing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that.

**What features of Southern Gothic Literature can you identify in the extract?**

# Knowledge Organiser



Tennessee Williams' Life

New Orleans



Southern Gothic Literature

History of the South



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## What is MASSOLIT?

MASSOLIT is an online lecture series delivered by university professors. The English Department at Blue Coat have subscribed, so all you need to do is follow the instructions on the student user guide to activate your account. The user guide can be found alongside the bridging materials. *Please note that if you do not have a Blue Coat email address yet you may not be able to access MASSOLIT. This is fine, your teacher will help you set it up when you arrive in September.*

## What should I do when my account is activated?

You should watch the available lectures series on the texts we are studying. Start by watching the lectures on *A Streetcar Named Desire* as this is the first text that you will study.

## What should I do as I watch?

The best way to use MASSOLIT is to make notes as you watch. Ideally, these will be Cornell style notes. There is a handy guide to Cornell notes [here](#). Make sure your notes are neat and detailed, and that you are ready to show them to your teacher in September.

## Further Reading

If you are interested in reading more texts like *Streetcar with Southern Gothic* elements, here are some good places to start. If you would like to read any of these texts you can click through the titles to find links to their Amazon pages.

### **BELOVED BY TONI MORRISON**

*Beloved* by Toni Morrison tells of a runaway pregnant slave and the aftermath that slavery has on her psyche and her family. When she's haunted by the ghost of her baby girl, her freedom becomes more complex, more compromised, even as her surviving daughter tries to save them both. This narration, too, spreads through generations, and it incorporates the collective unconscious of the African American people. This book is not only a true masterpiece, but it will actually, definitely change your life.

### **THE COLOR PURPLE BY ALICE WALKER**

The epistolary masterpiece *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker illustrates an abusive home life of two Black sisters in rural, early 20th century Georgia. Though we start by reading Celie's prayers, addressed, "Dear God," we also get letters among the characters. We follow Celie as she marries Mister so her sister won't have to, helps her sister escape their abusive home, and finds refuge in Shug Avery. This book is bound to break your heart, and if you haven't read it, you need to.

### **TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD BY HARPER LEE**

An important book that tells of the atrocities of the South (Alabama) through the eyes of a child, Scout, without shying away from the horror. Scout sees everything from the poverty of her classmates with "cooties" to the conviction of a man for rape because he is Black, to the reclusive man next door, of whom they have always been afraid. This is one book that everybody should read in their lifetime.