

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

May 2017: Old World vs. New World

- a) In the play, the old world of the South is more appealing than the new world of New Orleans.

Through analysis of the dramatic methods used in the play, and drawing upon relevant contextual information, **show to what extent** you agree with the above statement.

NB: In the following essay plan, I have used a colour-coding system whereby **dramatic methods** are presented in red, **context** is presented in green and **quotations** are highlighted.

There is substantial evidence that in the play, the old world of the South is more appealing than the new world of New Orleans, since Williams's portrayal of Stanley's brutishness paints a negative picture of the new world and suggests his nostalgia for the crumbling values of the South. Yet at the same time, he also acknowledges some unappealing aspects of the South and highlights some positive aspects of New Orleans.

One argument for seeing the new world of New Orleans as more appealing than the old world of the South is that it is characterized by greater social equality.

- Stanley's insistence on being recognized as an American, seen in Scene 8 when he identifies himself as **'one hundred per cent American'** and responds to Blanche's labelling of him as a **'Polack'** in a **furious tone**, telling her **'don't ever call me a Polack'**, shows that the South's social hierarchy has been replaced by alleged equality.
- This erosion of class distinctions was sparked by industrialization and urbanization, as well as movements towards racial and gender equality in the decades following WW1. With more workers moving to urban centres, slavery having been abolished in 1865 and women having been granted the right to vote in 1920, the Southern tradition of the aristocratic, landowning family began to die out and be replaced by the urbanized nuclear family. This process was hastened by the fact that after WW2, the working-class soldiers who had helped secure victory for the Allies came to be seen as embodying the spirit of American heroism, with the result that markers of social status shifted away from traditional values of aristocratic breeding towards the qualities of ambition, strength and industry.
- As an ex-soldier and the descendent of Polish immigrants, Stanley can be seen as a representative of the new world, and Williams uses his **colloquial expressions and non-standard grammar** to present the egalitarianism of postwar society as more appealing than the rigid social hierarchy of the old world: **'you thought I was common. How right you was, baby.'**

Another way in which Williams presents the new world of New Orleans as more appealing is by portraying it as less racist than the old world of the South.

- The greater ethnic diversity in the new world is evidenced by Williams' description of New Orleans as having an **'easy intermingling of races'** and the way the play opens with Eunice sitting with **'a coloured woman'**. Stella also describes Stanley's friends as **'a mixed lot'**, and the **bright, contrasting colours of the men's shirts** in Scene 3 **symbolize** the diversity that exists in New Orleans.

Williams's presentation of the greater sexual freedom in New Orleans also encourages us to see it as more appealing than the old world of the South.

- Williams implies that the new world has a healthier attitude towards female sexuality through the **image** contained in Stanley's claim that Stella 'loved it, having them coloured lights going!', which **symbolically** links sex with vitality. Stella and Stanley's sexual chemistry is reinforced through the **stage direction** describing how 'they come together with low, animal moans' at the end of Scene 3 and the **image** of Stella's expression of 'narcotized tranquility' in Scene 4, which implies a state of post-coital bliss.
- Williams's portrayal of Stella's sexual freedom contrasts with Blanche's attempt to repress her desire, as illustrated by the **stage direction** describing how she 'claps her hands to her ears' to block out the sound of the streetcar at the end of Scene 6. Blanche's perception of desire as a threatening force is also conveyed through her remark in Scene 4 that 'A man like that is someone to go out with... when the devil is in you.' This **metaphor** reflects the Southern conception of female desire as dangerous and destructive.
- Stella's embracing of her sexuality, meanwhile, reflects the fact that attitudes to sex were relaxing in post-war urban society thanks to the popularization of Freud's theory that desire was central to identity formation in both sexes – although it is important to note that sexuality was still very much defined within the context of marriage, and women who had sex outside marriage continued to be condemned and stigmatized.
- Williams's more positive portrayal of Stella's sexuality presents the new world as more appealing than the old and can be seen as reflecting his own love for the more liberal attitudes he encountered in New Orleans. He disclosed that 'It was after I went to New Orleans that I selected homosexuality as a way of sexual life.'

Another argument against seeing the world of the South as more appealing than the new world of New Orleans is that Williams uses **imagery to express his fondness for the city.**

- Despite acknowledging its 'atmosphere of decay' in the play's opening **stage directions**, Williams's positive regard for New Orleans is expressed through his **affectionate tone** he uses to describe the street in which the play is set as having 'a raffish charm' and the **vivid images** he uses to describe the sensations associated with the city, noting 'the warm breath of the brown river' and the 'faint redolences of bananas and coffee.'

A further reason for seeing the new world of New Orleans as more appealing than the old world of the South is that Williams acknowledges the negative aspects of Southern culture.

- In Scene 1, he connects Southern culture with death and decay through Blanche's **exclamation** 'All of those deaths!' and the **morbid image** of 'The long parade to the graveyard!' when she defends her loss of Belle Reve to Stella.
- Williams's presentation of Blanche as belonging to another time also challenges the claim that the old world of the South is more appealing than the new world. Her dismayed reaction to the size of the Kowalskis' apartment, the **anxious tone** she uses to ask Stella 'you have a maid, don't you?' and her casual racism towards Stanley, seen when she refers to him using the **derogatory term** 'Polack', all reveal the values of the South to be outdated.

However, a clear way in which Williams presents the old world of the South as more appealing than the new world is through Blanche's appalled reaction to the primitivism she encounters in New Orleans.

- Blanche's character can be seen as representing the old world of the South, **whose culture is rooted in aristocratic values like manners, education and chivalry**. Her symbolic status is clear from her **elegant white clothing**, which can be seen as **symbolising the virginal state**

that Southern women were expected to uphold – she is described as being ‘daintily dressed in a white suit’ –and her use of archaic phrases like ‘And such uncouth apparel!’, which reflects her educated background.

- Through Blanche’s remark to Stella in Scene 4 that ‘I take it for granted that you still have sufficient memory of Belle Reve to find this place and these poker players impossible to live with’, Williams presents the new world as unappealing by using **juxtaposition** to establish an **implicit contrast** between it and the South.
- Blanche’s speech at the end of Scene 4 also conveys Williams’s sadness at the loss of the positive values associated with the South. She presents the new world as primitive by labelling Stanley a ‘sub-human’, animalistic ‘survivor of the stone age’ and issuing Stella with the impassioned **imperative**: ‘don’t hang back with the brutes.’
- Blanche’s reaction to New Orleans can be seen as a vehicle for Williams’ mourning for the more appealing values of the old world. He himself claimed: ‘I write out of love for the South... a culture that had grace, elegance, and inbred culture’.

Another way in which Williams presents the old world of the South as more appealing than the new world of New Orleans is through his portrayal of Stanley’s violence.

- While Williams uses the **bold, primary colours** of Stanley’s clothing to **symbolize** the positive aspects of the type of masculinity found in New Orleans such as straightforwardness and vitality, it can be argued that he mourns the loss of Southern chivalry through his portrayal of Stanley’s aggression.
- He reinforces Stanley’s brutishness through the use of **animal metaphors**, as seen when Stella pronounces him a ‘drunk – animal thing’, and he illustrates his violent nature through the **offstage action** in Stage 3: ‘There is the sound of a blow’.
- Williams also uses his depiction of Steve’s violence towards Eunice, and Blanche’s and Stella’s contrasting reactions to Stanley’s violence, to highlight the extent to which violence against women has been normalized in the new world. Whereas Blanche is appalled by Stanley’s behaviour, Stella uses an **awed tone** to tell Blanche: ‘I was – sort of – thrilled by it’. By showing domestic violence to be an accepted part of life in New Orleans, Williams invites us to see the old world as more appealing.

Stanley’s victimization of Blanche provides another reason for seeing the old world of the South as more appealing than the new world of New Orleans.

- Williams’s view that the new world promotes a bullying form of masculinity can be seen in the way Stanley invades Blanche’s personal property in Scene 2 by **ripping the ribbon off her letters** and the **aggressive tone** he uses to quash her fantasy about Shep Huntleigh in Scene 10: ‘There isn’t a goddamn thing but imagination!’
- His use of the **stage direction** ‘He steps towards her, biting his tongue which protrudes between his lips’ in Scene 10 also conveys his negative opinion of new-world masculinity by portraying Stanley as a predator, while the **stage direction** ‘Stanley picks up the inert figure of Blanche and carries her to the bed’ presents the old world as more appealing than the new world by presenting new-world males as sexual aggressors.

Mitch’s treatment of Blanche provides further evidence that the old world of the South is more appealing than the new world of New Orleans.

- Through the **image** contained in Mitch’s declaration in Scene 9 that Blanche is ‘not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother’, Williams highlights the misogynistic values of the new world.

- That fact that Mitch no longer wants to marry Blanche after learning about her past but still tries to have sex with her – as shown through the **stage direction** used to describe him ‘**fumbling to embrace her**’ and his insistence that he wants ‘**What I been missing all summer**’ – reinforces the idea that new-world masculinity is characterized by sexual violence, in contrast to the South’s emphasis on chivalry.

Williams’s depiction of the new world of New Orleans as hostile and savage reinforces the appeal of the old world of the South.

- Williams’s use of a **jungle simile** to describe ‘**inhuman voices like cries in a jungle**’ in the **stage directions** for Scenes 10 and 11 depicts New Orleans as a threatening place.
- William also uses the **animal metaphor** of life as a rat-race in Stanley’s claim in Scene 11 that ‘**To hold front position in this rat-race you’ve got to believe you are lucky**’ to suggest that the new world rewards cruelty and primitivism – an idea that is reinforced by the fact that Stanley is allowed to carry on with his life at the end of the play while Blanche is removed from society.
- Williams’ depiction of New Orleans as a cutthroat world reflects the fact that there was a seedy underbelly to its positive aspects. During the 1940s, organized crime was rife under the direction of the mafia boss Carlos Marcello, and criminal gangs were behind the many brothels and bars throughout the city.

Overall, it can be argued that Williams presents the old world of the South as more appealing than the new world of New Orleans by using his depiction of Stanley’s violence and ruthlessness to mourn the erosion of the Southern values of chivalry and respect. While he highlights some appealing aspects of the new world and acknowledges that the culture of the South is far from perfect, his portrayal of the savagery of New Orleans conveys his sadness at the loss of the more positive aspects of Southern culture.