

## 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. 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 Five					
Scene Six					
Scene Seven					
Scene Eight					



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 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						



### 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*.