

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *A Streetcar Named Desire*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.
- According to psychoanalytic theory, there are three parts to the subconscious, which is the largest part of the human personality.

The three parts are:

1. **The id** – the basic desire. The id is the fundamental root of what a person wants. There is no sense of conscience in it, thus making it everyone’s “inner child.” Children, before they are taught social skills, operate entirely through the id. They cry in public, wet their diapers, and demand immediate gratification of their needs and desires.
2. **The superego** – the opposite of the id. This is the repository of all socially imposed behavior and sense of guilt. While the id is innate, the superego is learned through parental instruction and living in society. Humans develop a superego by having parents scold them, and other members of society criticize or teach them.
3. **The ego** – reality. The balance between the id and the superego. The ego takes the desires of the id, filters them through the superego, and comes up with an action that satisfies both entities. The ego realizes that the id must be satisfied, but that there are certain socially acceptable ways to achieve satisfaction.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the second view:

According to the second view, an essential relationship exists between the author of the work and the work itself. This view is in direct contrast to the Formalist approach to literature. In order to understand a work, one must fully understand the author’s life and emotional stance, and vice versa. Though a work might not be blatantly autobiographical, psychoanalysts argue that there is always something of the author in the work, whether it be a character, character trait, theme, or motif. Often, authors will satirize people they dislike or will be overtly sympathetic to people they do like. This author bias often has an effect on the reader, which is exactly what the author wants. When reading, people are extremely vulnerable to the author’s chosen point of view (the only way they hear the story is through the author’s narrator). This aspect of the psychoanalytic view is completely subjective and a relatively controversial approach to literature, but the psychoanalysts of the world argue that it is a valid and important type of literary study.

This type of psychoanalytic reading includes the following:

1. Reference to what is known or surmised about the author’s personality is used to explain and interpret a literary work. For example, Charles Dickens grew up poor and later wrote books very sympathetic to boys growing up poor.

2. Reference to a literary work is made in order to establish an understanding of the mind of the author. For example, judging by Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, one might reasonably conclude that Harper Lee herself was sympathetic to the plight of black Americans.
3. Studying the literary work of an author is a means of knowing the author as a person. The more novels by Charles Dickens one reads, the more one can infer about the author's beliefs, values, hopes, fears, etc.
4. An artist may put his or her repressed desires on the page in the form of actions performed by characters. Pay attention to behaviors that are not socially "normal" to see if there is any evidence of the id at work. For example, an author who consistently writes stories in which his female characters are weak, dependent, or unintelligent might be expressing latent misogynist tendencies. Likewise, a female author might express her latent misandry through weak, blatantly evil, or thoroughly inconsequential male characters. ■

Essential Questions for A Psychoanalytic Reading

1. What are the traits of the main character?
2. How does the author reveal those traits?
3. What do you learn about the character through the narrator?
4. What do you learn about the character from the way other characters relate to him or her?
5. What do you infer about the character from his or her thoughts, actions, and speech?
6. What discrepancies exist between the author's portrayal of the character and how other characters react to him or her?
7. What discrepancies exist between the author's portrayal of the character and the reader's inferences?
8. Is the main character a dynamic character (does he or she change throughout the course of the story)? If so, how and why?
9. How does the character view him or herself ?
10. What discrepancies exist between a character's view of him or herself and other characters' reactions, the author's portrayal, and/or reader inference?
11. How do the characters view one another?
12. Is there any discrepancy between a character's personal opinion of himself or herself and how others think about him or her?
13. What types of relationships exist in the work?
14. What types of images are used in conjunction with the character? What do they symbolize?
15. What symbols are used in the course of the story? What do they symbolize?
16. Do any characters have dreams or inner monologues? What is revealed about a character through dreams that would not otherwise be revealed?



17. Are there any inner conflicts within the character? How are these conflicts revealed? How are they dealt with? Are they ever resolved? How?
18. Do any characters perform uncharacteristic actions? If so, what? What could these actions mean?

Focus of Study

- Analyze the relationship between the author and his protagonist
- Explore autobiographical elements of the work
- Analyze the conflict between the id and the super id of principal characters
- Examine Stanley Kowalski as an expression of unchecked id

Activity One

Discerning the Relationship Between the Playwright and his Protagonist

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: Tennessee Williams Biography and *A Streetcar Named Desire*: Psychoanalytic Activity One: Moderator's Questions
2. Review the explanation of the Psychoanalytic Theory, second view, with the entire class if you have not already done so.
3. Divide the class into an even number of teams and assign each (or allow each to choose) one of the following positions:
 - **Team A:** Blanche DuBois expresses the viewpoints of the playwright and exhibits his strengths and weaknesses.
 - **Team B:** Blanche DuBois is a fictional and symbolic character, inspired by the playwright's mother and sister.
4. Have each team examine the Moderator's Questions and then review the play to construct an answer to each question that supports their assigned position.
5. Have each team list any additional support, not necessarily revealed by answering the moderator's questions, that supports its position.
6. Reconvene the class.
7. Use the Moderator's Questions to frame the debate. The instructor may pose the questions or choose student moderators to do so. The moderator(s) should instruct the debaters to cite specific examples from the play to support their points. The moderator also should feel free to introduce follow-up questions of his or her own.
8. After the debate, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each argument.

NOTE: Although this activity is framed as a "debate," students do not need to agree with one another or even come to consensus. The point is for them to consider both positions and examine the textual and biographical support for each.



A Streetcar Named Desire: Psychoanalytic Activity One

Tennessee Williams Biography

A Streetcar Named Desire, like most of Tennessee Williams's work, is peppered with bits and pieces of his own life, references to his past, and character traits drawn from family members. As much as any playwright of the twentieth century, Williams mined his tumultuous youth and dysfunctional family for inspiration, even as he recreated a world that was both gentler and more vicious than his own.

The playwright was born Thomas Lanier Williams on March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi, to Cornelius Coffin Williams, a traveling shoe salesman, and Edwina Estelle Dakin, a true Southern belle. His mother claimed to trace her ancestry to the Normans, while his father's family was descended from French Huguenots and included notable Tennessee politicians. With his father on the road most of his early life, the young Tom—the second of three children—lived with his mother and siblings at the Mississippi home of his grandfather, an Episcopal minister. This life of refinement in the Deep South came to an unhappy end when Cornelius Williams stopped traveling, went to work in the shoe company's factory and moved the family to St. Louis, Missouri. Biographers generally characterize these years as poor and unhappy. By most accounts, Williams's father was overbearing; his mother was pretentious and controlling; his beloved older sister, Rose, was lovely, intelligent, and mentally fragile. Dakin, whom Tennessee Williams called "my improbable little brother," would ultimately be the steady one and the keeper of the Williams legacy until his own death at age 89 in 2008.

In St. Louis, Williams's father forced the young Tom to work in the shoe factory, a job he loathed and one that drove him almost to a nervous collapse. At the shoe factory, according to several biographies, Williams worked with a young, apparently heterosexual man named Stanley Kowalski. Donald Spoto, one of Williams's biographers, theorizes that Williams was attracted to Kowalski, but maintains that he found no evidence the two were lovers. After a checkered academic career, Williams graduated from the University of Iowa in 1938 (at the age of 27).

Throughout his early years, Williams wrote poetry and plays, winning numerous small awards. His breakthrough came with his most autobiographical work, *The Glass Menagerie*, which opened in Chicago in 1944 and rapidly moved to Broadway. Controlling mother Amanda Wingfield was so thoroughly based on his own mother that, according to Dakin, Williams gave Edwina Williams 50 percent of the profits from the play. The fragile Laura Wingfield was his sister Rose in large measure. Even protagonist Tom Wingfield shared William's initials and given name, as well as his frustrations and flaws. *The Glass Menagerie* earned Williams the Drama Critics' Circle Prize and the Sidney Howard Memorial from the Playwrights Company and brought him overnight fame and wealth.

Like this earlier play, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is populated with characters reminiscent of, or directly drawn from, people in Tennessee Williams's own life. Like his mother, Blanche DuBois is a Southern belle given to pretensions. Like his sister, Blanche teeters precariously on the edge of insanity. And like Williams himself, Blanche drinks and pursues liaisons with inappropriate suitors.

Williams was enormously attached to his sister Rose and bore a lifetime of guilt and heartache over her mental condition. Always fragile, Rose began developing mental and emotional problems as a young woman and lapsed into what a modern psychiatrist might term a serious depression. From accounts, Rose also manifested symptoms of nymphomania—to her mother’s acute horror and deep shame.

Rose Williams underwent a frontal lobotomy at age 28 in 1937, and was for the remainder of her life childlike and severely impaired. As Eve Berliner writes in an article published online in *Eve’s Magazine*, Edwina Williams authorized the lobotomy on Rose and had it carried out without Williams’s knowledge, an act for which he never forgave his mother. Berliner quotes an excerpt from Williams’s diary, penned after a 1939 visit to Rose in which Williams called the visit a “horrible ordeal,” and mused that he feared a similar end for himself. (Ironically, in 1969 Dakin did commit his older brother to a mental institution because of Williams’s alcoholism and drug abuse.)

By the time of Rose’s lobotomy, Tennessee Williams had struggled with depression and suffered his first mental breakdown. He also was coming to terms with his homosexuality after experimenting with heterosexual relationships, according to interviews given by Dakin.

After graduating from college, Williams changed his name to Tennessee and moved to New Orleans. Some biographers have speculated that he changed his name to distance himself from his earlier works, which he considered inferior. Others surmise that he chose the name because Tennessee was the home of his father’s family and seemed more literary than the more mundane “Tom.” Whatever the reason, Tom Williams essentially created a new identity for himself and, as most biographers note, began living a private life as a homosexual.

As David Savran writes in *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*, homosexuality was Williams’s open secret. He did not flaunt his sexual orientation, nor did he try to hide it by maintaining a false front as a married man, as did other celebrities and actors of that era. Although Williams lived with longtime partner Frank Merlo from 1947 until Merlo’s death from cancer in 1961, he did not publicly “come out” until 1970, during an appearance on *The David Frost Show*.

For a time, while Williams was writing *A Streetcar Named Desire*, he was involved with Pancho Rodriguez Gonzalez, a rough man whom some critics and biographers see as the source of inspiration for Stanley Kowalski. (Other biographers maintain that Williams drew on the less desirable characteristics of his sometimes abusive and reputedly philandering father to create Stanley’s brutish nature.) Williams’s relationship with Pancho Rodriguez Gonzalez (occasionally referred to as Pancho Rodriguez) is the subject of a play, *Rancho Pancho*, by Gregg Barrios.

One of the poker players in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is named Pablo Gonzales, a possible allusion to Williams’s former lover. Williams also created a character named Pablo Gonzales, his first openly homosexual protagonist, in a short story, “The Mysteries of the Joy Rio,” which he wrote in 1941 but did not publish until 1954. [Note the differences in the spelling of the last names of the fictional characters and Williams’s lover, Gonzalez.]



After the 1961 death of his partner, Frank Merlo, Williams began what would be a prolonged downward spiral. Like many of his characters, he drank and used drugs to excess and battled severe depression. Dakin drew the everlasting wrath of his older brother when in 1969 he committed Williams to a mental hospital in St. Louis, a controversial measure which probably saved the playwright's life. Although Williams continued to write until his death, critics found his later work inferior to the plays he produced during the height of his career from the early 1940s until Merlo's death. Williams, himself, seemed to foretell the trajectory his own life would follow.

Four days before *A Streetcar Named Desire* debuted on Broadway, Williams mused in an essay in the *New York Times* about his sudden stardom and all the changes that had come with it, some not for the better. The essay, "On A Streetcar Named Success," is included in paperback publications of the play and provides valuable insight into the playwright's state of mind at the time. In the essay, Williams wrote of his emotional rise and fall, describing what modern psychiatrists would label a classic depression in which he lost interest in almost everything and "felt too lifeless inside" to ever create another masterwork.

"Security is a kind of death, I think, and it can come to you in a storm of royalty checks beside a kidney-shaped pool in Beverly Hills or anywhere at all that is removed from the conditions that made you an artist, if that's what you are or were or intended to be," Williams wrote.

Williams would continue throughout his life to try to exorcise the demons of his youth and of his own excesses through his writing. He and his family would make appearances time and again as one or more of his memorable characters. It was in the ephemeral *Blanche*, however, that brother Dakin saw his brother most clearly.

"Blanche is Tennessee," Dakin Williams told Debbie Elliott in a 2002 interview for National Public Radio. "If Tennessee would tell you something, it wouldn't be necessarily true... And so, everything in *Blanche* was really like Tennessee."

Williams's death in 1983 would mark one last ironic connection to his protagonist Blanche DuBois, who meets a catastrophic end on Elysian Fields Avenue. Alone in a room in the Elysee Hotel (whose French name translates as Elysium or Elysian in English) in New York City, Williams choked to death on a medicine bottle cap after a night of heavy drinking and drug use. Dakin maintained for years that Williams had been murdered, but his claims were largely disregarded.

Williams was one of the most prolific playwrights of the twentieth century, producing dozens of plays and films, and publishing print editions of his screen and stage scripts as well as book-length and short fiction, and a memoir. His work won numerous awards including two Pulitzer Prizes, one for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Fifteen of his plays were made into movies, especially *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which introduced the world to a young and then-unknown Marlon Brando.

A Streetcar Named Desire: Psychoanalytic Activity One**Moderator's Questions**

1. Blanche DuBois is a Southern belle from Mississippi. Tennessee Williams was born in Columbus, Mississippi. The play takes place in New Orleans, where Williams lived for a time. However, a Southern heritage is not enough to make a character the author's alter ego. What else do they have in common? How are they different?
2. Blanche claims that the family plantation, Belle Reve, was lost through the "epic fornications" of her ancestors. Is Tennessee Williams saying that his own Southern heritage was destroyed by the mistakes of his family (marriage of his mother, career choices of his father), or is he commenting symbolically about the South?
3. Blanche drinks. Is Williams drawing upon his own experience with alcohol or is the drinking a plot device?
4. Blanche is described as having a "neurasthenic" personality at the beginning of Scene Six. Is Williams developing her character or expressing his own mental anguish?
5. Allan Gray kills himself after Blanche says she is "disgusted" by his behavior. Stella says Blanche was married to a "degenerate." What is Tennessee Williams saying about homosexuality? What reasons might Williams have for making Gray kill himself?
6. Are the names Stanley Kowalski and Pablo Gonzales personally significant to the playwright?
7. As Williams portrays Blanche slipping into insanity, is he writing about his own mental state, describing his sister's ordeal or creating a fictional and symbolic situation?
8. When Blanche says, "I don't want realism, I want magic," who is really speaking, the character or the author?



Activity Two

Exploring the Conflict Between the Id and the Superego of Blanche DuBois

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *A Streetcar Named Desire: Activity Two Questions*.
2. Review with the students the definitions for the three parts of the subconscious—the id, the superego and the ego—as defined in Notes on Psychoanalytic Theory.
3. Divide the class into pairs or small groups.
4. Have each group review the play and answer the questions on the handout.

NOTE: Caution the students that they should approach each question and answer from a psychoanalytic viewpoint and phrase their answers accordingly. (For example, rather than merely simply contrasting Blanche's desire to be seen as a talented and independent businesswoman with the reality of her being weak and ineffectual, students should stress that, because her ego cannot reconcile her id's view of herself as a talented and independent businesswoman, it protects her by fabricating the deceptions, which her superego half believes.)

5. Reconvene the class and have each group report its findings.
6. As a class, discuss the following questions:
 - Why does Blanche lie? To what extent does she believe her own lies?
 - How does Blanche see herself? How is her self-image different from the way other characters and the audience see her?
 - How does Blanche reconcile her wants (her id) with her sense of propriety and guilt (her superego)? Or does she?
 - What is significant about the fact that she is psychologically destroyed at the end of the play? What has been the psychoanalytic mechanism of this destruction?



A Streetcar Named Desire: Psychoanalytic Activity Two

Questions

1. What does Blanche want? How does her id express itself?

2. What inhibits Blanche?

3. How does Blanche reconcile the conflict between her id and superego?

4. What does Blanche reveal about herself with the monologue in Scene One?

5. How are the inconsistencies in Blanche's personality revealed in Scene Three?



- 6. What is Blanche admitting when she insists to Mitch in Scene Nine that she “never lied in [her] heart,” and she tells him, “I don’t want realism. I want magic”?

- 7. What psychological need does Mitch’s courtship fill for Blanche? What motivates her treating him differently from the other men with whom she has had relationships?

Activity Three

Analyzing Stanley, Stella, and Blanche as the Three Aspects of the Personality

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *A Streetcar Named Desire: Psychoanalytic Activity Three: Id, Ego, Superego*.
2. Divide the class into an even number of groups.
3. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following groupings:
 - **Group A:** Blanche as Id, Stella as Ego, Stanley as Superego
 - **Group B:** Stanley as Id, Stella as Ego, Blanche as Superego

NOTE: If some students insist that perhaps Stella is id or superego, you may create additional groups to accommodate those interpretations, but make certain that Stanley as id and Blanche as id are well represented.

4. Allow each group to divide the task as it sees fit.
5. Have students examine the book and note all dialogue, actions, or stage directions that illustrate the support their group's interpretation.
6. Reconvene the class and allow each group to present its findings.

NOTE: Students do not need to agree or come to consensus. The point is to examine the different characters in these different roles.

7. As a class, discuss the following questions:
 - Does one character, more than the others, act out of pure self-interest and self-gratification?
 - Is there any character who is motivated by external standards of right and wrong, or social respectability?



A Streetcar Named Desire: Psychoanalytic Activity Three

Id, Ego, Superego

The id is the unorganized part of the personality and functions unconsciously—the individual is not consciously aware of the effect of the id's drives on his or her thoughts and behavior.

- Id governs an individual's most basic needs or desires: food, water, sex.
- It operates on the “pleasure-pain principle”: seek pleasure and avoid pain by any means possible.
- Id is completely amoral; there is no “right and wrong” except the seeking of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.
- It is completely egocentric; no one else's desires matter.
- It demands immediate satisfaction.
- Id has no sense of time; everything is in the present.
- It is completely illogical, its governing “logic” being the pleasure-pain principle.

Freud divided the id's drives and instincts into two categories:

- life instincts include those drives that are crucial to pleasurable survival, such as eating, drinking, sleeping, and sexual activity;
- death instincts reflect the individual's unconscious wish to die, to end the daily struggles for primal satisfaction. This desire for peace manifests itself in all attempts to escape reality like reading fiction; consuming television, movies, plays and other media; and using and abusing drugs.

The ego is a component of the organized part of the personality and functions consciously—the individual is aware of his or her thought processes and decisions that attempt to balance instinctive/unconscious impulses and social and cultural regulations.

- Ego acts according to the reality principle; not all impulses can be acted on, or desires fulfilled, immediately; societal norms and other people need to be taken into consideration.

- Its purpose is to fulfill the id's desires in ways that will benefit the personality in the long term rather than bringing unfulfillment and/or unhappiness.
- It represents the part of the awareness commonly called the "reason" or "common sense."

Freud compared the relationship of the ego to the id as a rider (ego) controlling a powerful horse (id) and using its energy to travel. (Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 1923.)

- The ego mediates among the id, the superego and the external world to find a balance between the id's primitive drives and the demands of an external reality.
- It is the mediator between the id and the superego, trying to enable the needs of both to be met.
- Ego occasionally cannot reconcile the demands of the id and the superego; develops a series of defense mechanisms to protect itself (and the total individual) from psychological destruction:
 - denial
 - displacement
 - intellectualization
 - fantasy
 - compensation
 - projection
 - rationalization
 - reaction formation
 - regression
 - repression
 - sublimation
- These defense mechanisms are not intentional or conscious; they protect the individual by hiding dangerous or threatening desires or impulses.

The superego is a component of the organized part of the personality and functions mostly unconsciously—for the most part, the individual is not consciously aware of the effect of the superego's mandates and prohibitions on his or her thoughts and behavior.

- Superego controls the individual's sense of right and wrong and guilt—the conscience.

- It works in contradiction to the id; while the id would have all of its desires met instantaneously and by any means, the superego will deny the satisfaction of all impulses that do not strictly conform to internalized social, moral, or other, codes.
- Superego helps the individual fit into society by making it act in socially acceptable ways.
- It is formed after the individual's birth and develops as the individual matures and attempts to achieve a place in society.

Discussion Questions

1. What personal biases does Williams apparently reveal through his treatment of the characters Blanche and Stanley? How does he reveal these biases?
2. What discrepancies exist between Blanche's view of herself and
 - Stella's reaction to her?
 - Stanley's reaction to her?
 - Mitch's reaction to her?
3. What is the significance of Blanche's final descent into madness?

Essays or Writing Assignments

1. In a well-developed essay, explore interactions of the three central characters—Stella, Stanley, and Blanche—in terms of the functioning of the id, ego, and superego. Do the three combine to form a psychologically healthy individual? Why or why not? Be certain to support all of your arguments with direct references to the text.
2. Write a well-reasoned and -developed essay in which you analyze Williams's use of music, sound, and visual effects to suggest characters' psychological states.