

**1. What is the discourse about? (What are the issues present in the discourse?)**

The discourse of this paper is an analysis of the music employed by Tennessee Williams in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This work, which is a straight play, uses different types of music to break down the fourth wall between the audience and the characters, to add to the depth of the characters of the play, and to give more insight into the themes of the play itself. The main characters that I talk about within this paper are Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski with regard to the music that characterizes them. Music also plays a large role in creating the setting of New Orleans in the time period that the play takes place and the themes of hope, fear, and reality vs. illusion.

**2. Why is the discourse needed? (What prompted the discourse and why is it an important time to deliver it?)**

The discourse is important because it explains some of the choices that the author of a very well known play has made and how he defied standards of his time by adding music to an otherwise straight play. As this play is largely autobiographical, Tennessee Williams also gives some insight to his personal life and feelings through the choices he made, especially with regard to the choices surrounding the character of Blanche DuBois.

**3. What should the discourse accomplish? (What are the goals of the discourse? How is the audience supposed to react to the discourse?)**

The goal of this discourse is to communicate to the audience that music is far more than just music in this play. By that I mean that I want the audience to understand by the end of this essay why Williams made the choices that he did and how it relates to the play, and even adds to it. My main goal is that the reader understands the choices made even if they are not well versed with the subject matter of the play itself.

**Strengths:**

- The essay contains a lot of information on the music
- The essay gives multiple examples and cites specific scenes
- There are a lot of citations and a good bibliography if the audience has any questions
- The information is well organized and easy to understand

**Weaknesses:**

- The essay may be a little bit more geared toward people who are familiar with the play
- Because I know this play inside and out, there are certain things that may make sense to me that might not to the reader
- Some lines may just be trying to make conclusions for time restrictions when I wrote the essay

**Abstract:** Tennessee Williams is one of the most well known Southern dramatists, writing many plays over a career that spanned decades. One of Williams' most well known plays, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, is still read today in many high school and college classes. One aspect of his writing style that sets Williams apart from his contemporaries is the use of music throughout his plays. This essay explores that employment of music in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, linking the different types of music to the tone of the scenes in which they appear. Music also functions in this play as a tool that strengthens character development, highlights the play's themes, and connects the audience to the setting of the play, allowing them to become a part of the scenes.

#### The Role of Music in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

There are many different goals that modern dramatists try to achieve when writing a play, the largest being the desire to evoke a certain emotion from the reader in response to the text. One playwright who was effective in doing so was Tennessee Williams.

Williams was born in the South, which accounts for the fact that most of his plays are written with stereotypically Southern characters and settings. Williams deviates from the standard model of plays associated with modern drama with the addition of music throughout his works. In his play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams utilizes music in order to strengthen the development of his characters, as a way of highlighting the main themes of the play, and as a method of connecting the audience to the setting of the play itself.

One of the first people that the reader is introduced to in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* is Blanche DuBois, who has come from Mississippi to visit her

**Comment [BH1]:** Consider rewording this phrase – the largest goal is “to evoke a certain emotion” so I’m not sure you need “the desire”

**Comment [BH2]:** Consider revising thesis for a stronger focus – there’s a lot going on in this thesis, and it could be helpful for readers to focus in on one of these functions of music and to explore it in depth.

\*I’d suggest focusing on what music reveals about character, and about subsequent character development, because that’s what seemed strongest in your material.  
 - the themes of the play tie into character  
 - you could argue that setting IS a character

sister Stella and brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski at their home in New Orleans. Over the course of the play, the lies that Blanche tells in order to make herself seem more desirable spiral out of control, blurring the line between illusion and reality for her as the play progresses. Music, particularly the repeated sound of the Varsouviana polka, plays a large role in the audience's understanding of Blanche's character and her actions over the course of the play. The first mention of the polka music comes toward the end of scene one when Stanley is getting to know his sister-in-law and, upon his asking questions about Blanche's marriage, "The music of the polka rises up, faint in the distance," which only Blanche and the reader are aware of (Williams 866). We learn about the meaning behind the polka tune in scene six when Blanche tells Mitch that she and her husband were dancing to the Varsouviana polka when she admitted to him that she knew of his affair with a man, emphasizing her disgust with him for doing so. It was also playing as Blanche's young husband went outside and shot himself after hearing her confession and seeing her clear disgust in him. As Blanche is telling her story, Williams notes in his stage directions that the sound of the polka tune in Blanche's mind stops abruptly with the mentioning of the gun shot and then resumes in a major key, fading only as Mitch promises to be there for Blanche, embracing her (897). The music of the polka is the most important musical element in the play because of its connection to the death of Blanche's husband and was, in fact, "the first musical element Williams integrated into the draft play's script" (Davison). In her article "Realism and Theatricalism in *A Streetcar Named Desire*," Mary Ann Corrigan notes that, "The music, through its association in her memory with impending death, becomes a symbol of imminent disaster" (388). In the context of the play, the disaster that is foreshadowed by the dark

**Comment [BH3]:** If readers are unfamiliar with this play, they might not understand what you're talking about – consider adding another brief explanatory line (like the one above) summarizing the overall plot of the play.

**Comment [BH4]:** Consider rewording for clarity – can music be "mentioned"? Are you referring to stage directions in the script, or a performance of the play?

**Comment [BH5]:** Consider revising for clarity – is this a stage direction? Readers might assume you're talking about a performance of the play.

\*Also, if this is a stage direction, how does the reader know that Blanche hears the music? Is this also in the stage directions?

**Comment [BH6]:** But WHY is this connection to her dead husband important?  
\*It might be helpful for readers if you elaborated – HOW does the death of her husband affect Blanche?

Consider tying this to your discussion about Blanche's yearning for love and desirability.

connection between the sound of the polka music and Blanche's dead husband is that of her downfall. We begin to see the beginning of this downfall in scene nine when Mitch confronts Blanche about the stories Stanley has told him of her affairs at the Flamingo hotel in Laurel, the tune of the polka rising with his examination of her in the light and fading away when Mitch tries to have his way with Blanche before admitting that he no longer wants to marry her (Williams 909). This revelation from Mitch brings Blanche to one of her lowest points in the play, setting her up for the following scene, when she truly reaches her breaking point at the hands of Stanley.

Another character whose development comes with the addition of music is the male lead of the play, Stanley Kowalski. The music associated with Stanley is, much like the clothing that he wears, loud and definitive. In scene three after Stella has gone up to Eunice's flat for the night upon being beaten by her husband, Stanley goes outside and tries to win her back, realizing the severity of what he has just done. When Stanley first sobers up and realizes that Stella has left him, his brutishness takes over and as he calls Eunice and yells for Stella with, "Dissonant brass and piano sounds as the rooms dim out to darkness and the outer walls appear in the night light" (Williams 879). Here, the loud jazz music echoes Stanley's masculinity and the sound of the blues resonate with the sorrow that he feels upon his "baby doll" leaving him. Music plays a large role with regard to Stanley's character in scene ten as well when the conflict between he and Blanche comes to a head. After Stanley changes into his silk pajamas to celebrate the arrival of his new son, he catches Blanche trying to call Western Union in fear of him, causing her to drop the phone. As the suspense of the scene rises with Stanley's actions, the sounds of the blue piano as well as the sound of a passing locomotive begin to grow

**Comment [BH7]:** Consider rewording – this is a little redundant ("begin" "beginning")

**Comment [BH8]:** Consider revising – this sentence is a little lengthy/wordy and might be difficult for readers to follow.

**Comment [BH9]:** Consider rewording – "comes" might not appropriately describe "development"

**Comment [BH10]:** These are great descriptions!! \*But I think it would be helpful for readers if you gave a brief summary of his character and his role in the play.

This would give readers context for the examples you provide later in this paragraph.

**Comment [BH11]:** Consider condensing for clarity/brevity – these are specific details that probably aren't necessary to the readers' understanding of your point.

**Comment [BH12]:** "with" doesn't really make sense here

**Comment [BH13]:** Consider revising – this is a wordy, lengthy sentence.

**Comment [BH14]:** This is a rather specific detail – focus instead on providing only relevant details to portray the story in broad strokes.

even louder (914). As the music grows louder with Stanley's approach, Blanche begins to realize that "she will be forced to become part of this world of hot music and lust," meaning that she is doomed to face the date that Stanley has known would arrive since the day that Blanche arrived at the Kowalski's flat (Corrigan 391). The loud and brassy jazz tones that are associated with Stanley help the reader to understand his sheer brutality over the course of the play, especially during the rape scene with Blanche.

One of the main themes of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is that of the battle for power between men and women, which is manifested in the conflict for power over the Kowalski home between Blanche and Stanley over the course of the play. Williams uses music over the course of the play to demonstrate this struggle for power between Blanche and Stanley. In scene seven, Williams masterfully overlaps Blanche's singing of "It's Only a Paper Moon" with Stanley's argument with Stella over when Blanche will be returning to Mississippi. As Blanche sings, Stanley begins to tell Stella all of the lies that Blanche has told and what he has learned about what she had really been doing in Laurel after being fired from the school, rather than being on the leave of absence that she has informed Stella she is on. As Stanley grows more insistent of Blanche's actions in Laurel and tries to convince Stella even more of them and their validity, Blanche's singing grows louder, asserting her capacity to take the lies that she has created and, though they are imagined, turn them into facts, as she has been doing since her arrival in New Orleans (Corrigan 389). This song holds many meanings to this scene, which was supposed to be Blanche's birthday celebration (Williams 897-899). The lyrics "But it wouldn't be make-believe If you believed in me" relate to the fact that Blanche sees her love affair with Mitch and his devotion to her as turning her illusion into a reality. This song expresses

**Comment [BH15]:** Consider revising - the beginning of this sentence is redundant (following immediately after the phrase "begin to grow even louder" in the previous sentence)

**Comment [BH16]:** Consider revising - wordy

**Comment [BH17]:** Consider revising - wordy - could confuse readers

**Comment [BH18]:** Consider revising for clarity/brevity - these specific details might bog the reader down - describe the conflict more broadly

Blanche's need for and hope of having a meaningful relationship with Mitch, despite the fact that everything she did to make him fall in love with her was an illusion (Maiman 20). In Blanche's eyes, her lies and the illusion she has created is her reality, and if only someone believed in her, as the song says, than her illusion would become his reality as well. Williams also ties the meaning of this song to the paper lantern that Blanche has placed over the lamp in the Kowalski flat, shielding people from seeing the real her. When Mitch tears the paper lantern from the lamp in scene nine, he has ripped away Blanche's protection and has crushed her dreams for a relationship with him, turning her imagined reality into what it truly is, a web of lies (21). The reference to paper itself also deals with Stanley rifling through Blanche's things earlier on in the play and finding old love letters as well as other papers from Belle Reve, which serves as a metaphor for Blanche's fragility and the fact that, much like the papers in her trunk, she has been, according to Philip C. Kolin, "fragmented, severed, torn from one world (Belle Reve to Laurel) and slipped into another (Stanley's New Orleans)" (456). The song "It's Only a Paper Moon" sung by Blanche in scene seven serves as a way to further understand the way that Blanche sees her own life and what she wants that life to be as well as how that dream of a better life gets crushed with the conclusion of the play.

Another place that the struggle for power between Blanche and Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is manifested through music is during the poker scene. The poker scene is one of the most male oriented scenes throughout the entire play and, as such, the men of the scene made it very clear that they wanted the women to leave for the night so that they could have the house to themselves. The conflict comes when the women return home before the men finish their game, ruining their sacred night of booze,

**Comment [BH19]:** I really love this point, but you don't really tie it in to the focus of this particular paragraph (the power struggle)

\*if you want to keep this material in this particular paragraph, continue to relate it and tie it back to the power struggle that you mention in the topic sentence

**Comment [BH20]:** I don't think you need to mention the title again – sort of distracts from your point.

poker, and, most importantly, no women. As if this were not enough to set Stanley off, Blanche tests him even more as she “crosses leisurely to a small white radio” in the bedroom and turns it on (Williams 875). At this point, Blanche knows that she is angering Stanley, which only causes her to continue doing so. When Stanley asks the women to turn off the radio and they refuse, he crosses over and turns off the radio himself, glaring at Blanche after doing so. After this exchange, Blanche spends some time talking to Mitch and, after inferring that the poker game has ended, turns the radio on again, before getting a clear verbal answer on whether or not the game had ended. At this blatant disrespect for his power in the Kowalski household, Stanley crosses to the radio once more and throws it over the women’s heads and out the window, leaving them cowering in fear (878). This response from the women is exactly what Stanley wanted to see in the act of turning off and then throwing the radio out of the window, which serves as a metaphor for Stanley, the man, taking the music out of the women’s lives. Stanley’s harsh treatment of the radio, and other inanimate objects over the course of the play, gives the reader insight into his character and leads the reader to correctly believe that Stanley will eventually act this way with the women (Vlasopolos 328). The action of Stanley throwing the radio out the window demonstrates Stanley’s eternal need for power in his own home and serves as a tool to foreshadow the fact that he will do whatever it takes to maintain that power, even if it means physical violence, which ends up being the case with the conclusion of the play.

The music of the blue piano is the music most widely written about over the course of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and can be seen repeatedly in Tennessee Williams’ stage directions. The last line of stage directions before scene one begins is the first place

**Comment [BH21]:** WHY does she test him? What is this power struggle about? What is Blanche trying to accomplish?

where the blue piano is mentioned, its music overlapping with the voices of people on the street (Williams 857). The fact that the reader is introduced to this sound before the action of the play even begins signifies its importance. While the sound of the blue piano has many functions over the course of the play, its placement right at the beginning of the play “seems itself a realistic touch for ‘The Quarter,’” that is **the French Quarter in New Orleans (Fleche 498)**. This “perpetual blue piano” can be heard whenever the door is left open at the Kowalski flat, such as at the beginning of scene two, and provides insight into what might be happening beyond those doors (Williams 866). While the music of the blue piano **acts as a way for the reader to be able to envision the setting of the play**, it also acts as a strong magnifier for certain parts of the plot. **The sound of the blue piano can be heard and read at different points in scenes with regard to each of the main characters of the play.** With regard to Blanche, we first hear the blue piano as she arrives in the French Quarter and also dominates at the point in scene one when she recounts all of the deaths at Belle Reve as well as at the end of scene five when she kisses the collection boy just before her date with Mitch (891). The purpose of the blue piano in scene one mimics the sorrow that Blanche felt when all of her relatives died at Belle Reve while Stella was in New Orleans with Stanley. The blue piano is also present in the final scene of the play when the young doctor and the nurse are taking Blanche to the asylum. Williams utilizes the sound of the blue piano with regard to Blanche as a way of highlighting her downfall that has been created by the lies that have become her reality. The sound of the blue piano also plays a large part in the rape scene and illuminates Stanley’s animalistic qualities, as mentioned earlier. While the main reason for Williams’ inclusion of the blue piano is to set the scene of the play and paint a more vivid picture of the setting of New

**Comment [BH22]:** \*you could argue that setting IS as much a character in its own right, and tie this into the overall main idea of your thesis

**Comment [BH23]:** Consider revising for clarity/brevity – wordy, could be condensed

**Comment [BH24]:** Consider revising/reorganizing – you’ve already touched on this topic in your previous paragraphs addressing character development



Orleans for the reader, it doubles as a way for the reader to understand certain aspects of Blanche and Stanley's characters over the course of the play.

Typically, a drama in the modern age is known for having dialogue and stage directions that create a main conflict of a play, its rising action, climax, falling action, and conclusion. Tennessee Williams alters the form of the modern drama in his play *A Streetcar Named Desire* by the inclusion of music as a dominant force over the course of the play and the main conflict. Williams' deviation from the standard model of a modern drama utilizes music in order to strengthen the development of his characters, as a way of highlighting modern ideas expressed in the play, and as a method of connecting the audience to the setting of the play itself. Williams' usage of music over the course of *A Streetcar Named Desire* as well as in his other plays can be seen as something that was not used by many of his predecessors and, as such, sets him apart from those of his time and distinguishes him as a playwright.

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