

# Teacher Resource 1 Approaching the exam question

- The passage comes near the climax of the play. Stella has gone into labour and Stanley has taken her to hospital, leaving Blanche alone in their apartment. Having failed to attend her birthday celebration that afternoon, Mitch has arrived to see Blanche who is pathetically pleased to see him.
- The first four lines of the extract are all simple or minor sentences; Blanche and Mitch are communicating honestly for perhaps the first time in the play and this is reflected in the direct simplicity of their language. The word 'lie' is repeated six times in varying forms in just these four lines, emphasizing the significance to both characters of honesty or avoiding it.
- Blanche's line 'I didn't lie in my heart' recalls her earlier insistence that 'I don't tell the truth. I tell what *ought* to be the truth.' Sexuality is an area of Blanche's life about which she's least honest, knowing as she does that the truth would jeopardise completely her chances of a life with Mitch.
- The appearance of the blind Mexican woman crying in Spanish 'flowers for the dead' develops the equivocal relationship in the play between death and sexuality. Is sexual desire the opposite of death or the impulse that takes us towards it?
- The Mexican woman's cries trigger in Blanche memories of the 'grim reaper [putting] up his tent on our doorstep' and, as often in the final scenes, she retreats into the past, almost oblivious of Mitch. At this point, the Varsouviana returns, reminding the audience of Allan's death (also associated with sexual desires considered unacceptable) which ironically Blanche narrated to Mitch earlier in the play.
- Blanche's memory of an argument she has had in the past is vocalised: "If you'd done this, it wouldn't've cost me that!" It crystallises the state of her relationship with Mitch: her past indiscretions have cost her any chance of marriage.
- Her exclamatory minor sentence 'Legacies!' points towards the play's insistence on the past and its importance to Blanche's tragedy. As Adrian Poole notes, 'Tragedy always deals with toxic matter bequeathed by the past to the present.'
- Blanche returns here to horrors of death ('the struggle for breath and bleeding') which she outlined to Stella earlier in the play. Her speech is fragmented, with several ellipses and plenty of scripted non-fluency. Mitch is entirely silent in this passage, considerations of the present subordinate entirely to the past.
- Blanche's memories turn again to desire and her encounters with trainee soldiers on the lawn of Belle Reve. She makes the point explicitly that desire is the opposite of death but she says little of her own desires, recalling instead the desire of the soldiers *for* her. Sexual expression is encoded as a transgressive gesture towards the older generation as Blanche recalls slipping outside, past the 'deaf old lady' who 'suspected nothing'; this anticipates Mitch's reference to his mother later in the scene.
- It's interesting that her simile to describe the soldiers ('like daisies') extends the play's flower motif; Stella tells Blanche she looks 'fresh as a daisy', only for Blanche to retort, 'One that's been picked a few days'; Mitch brings Blanche roses at the end of Scene V; Blanche refers to herself as 'La Dame aux Camellias' in Scene VI; Stanley twice denies sarcastically that Blanche is like a lily in Scene VII; and obviously there is the cry of the Mexican flower seller in this scene.
- The focus returns to the present as the flower seller exits and the polka music fades out. Mitch becomes active, making the sort of physical advances on Blanche which on their earlier date she had 'felt obliged to discourage'. Mitch's sexual aggression anticipates Stanley's in the following scene and reveals his true desire for Blanche which has thus far been belied by his chivalrous behaviour (another example of a character performing a role).
- For Blanche, her sexual availability is contingent on marriage; earlier in the play, she tells Stella, 'I want his respect. And men don't want anything they get too easy.' There are several interesting ironies of her imperative 'Then marry me, Mitch!': it comes after her revelation of her sexual encounters with the soldiers, but it also reverses the expectation of Southern women of the time that it would be men that propose marriage – an indication of Blanche's desperation.
- Mitch's sexual double standards are revealed; he'll sleep with Blanche but, aware of her sexual past, no longer considers her marriage material. His cruelly direct threat to Blanche's positive face ('You're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother:') is ironic given Blanche's incessant bathing during the play.

