

AQA English Literature A-level

A Streetcar Named Desire: Themes Female Entrapment

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INTRODUCTION

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams explores the extent to which **female expression, sexuality and freedom** can be accepted or possible in 1940s America.

Through the **tragic portrayal** of **female entrapment**, Williams suggests that **rigid power structures** of **hegemonic masculinity** and **female inferiority**, are present.

More specifically, this is explored through the intentional crafting of **socially subordinate female characters** like Blanche and Stella, who are fundamentally **dependent on men** for survival.

Williams illustrates the female characters as those who are **confined** within their **physical and psychological worlds**; while he crafts the male characters as **catalysts** for the disintegration of the female characters' overarching freedom (Stella) and their psyche (Blanche).

Social and Historical Context

New Orleans

Williams creates a **false sense of security** by depicting **New Orleans** as a **liberal cultural melting pot** in the opening scene.

- ❖ We are shown the energy and bustle of the New South's "**cosmopolitan city**", highlighted by the alleged "**easy intermingling of races**" (scene 1) and the serene jazz music of the "**blue piano**" expressing the city's "**spirit of life**".
- ❖ Our initial impression is one of **progressive change**, a break with the Old South mentality of slavery plantations and rigid power structures.

However, the **irony** of New Orleans is clear as it is **far from the inclusive utopia** presented to us in the opening scene, with issues of **sexism and racism** still ripe at the heart of the city and throughout the play.

Williams subtly introduces the **deep-seated cultural misogyny** of **post-war America** when Stanley alludes to the '**Napoleonic Code**' (Scene 2) in New Orleans, Louisiana.

- For context, the Napoleonic Code was a **legal code** enforced in Louisiana from **French colonial rule** that **authorised women's property** in the **hands of their husbands**.
- The **harsh reality** of this law, combined with Stanley's **casual references** to this Napoleonic Code acts as a **microcosm** for the **deep-rooted entrapment** of **female freedom** in this society.



- Not only was it considered a **social norm** for women to be their male counterparts' **social inferior**, but it was considered so common that Stanley feels comfortable pointing it out on several occasions

Elysian Fields

In **Greek Mythology**, **Elysian Fields** was originally the **paradise in the Underworld** where **immortal heroes** were sent. Later on, it became the resting ground reserved for the 'blessed dead' or for **deceased, virtuous heroes**.

Williams uses **proleptic irony** in his intentional creation of Elysian Fields as **Stanley's street name** to foreshadow his physical **victory** over Blanche and psychological victory over Stella.



Image source: <https://cutt.ly/Ck9tmLS>

Through the **symbolism** of Elysian Fields, Williams powerfully illustrates the **stark power imbalance** between **male and female self-expression**. For Stanley, his home serves as a **sanctuary for his desires**, pleasures and **masculine dominion**, represented through his bowling, playing poker and drinking, instead of working. Contrastingly, for the **women** in the play, Elysian Fields transforms into a place of **permanent entrapment**.

- For Blanche, Elysian Fields represents the **disintegration** of her **psyche** through the verbal and physical abuse she tolerates from Stanley. It symbolises the **harsh reality of life** (desire, male dominion, drunkenness) and contrasts with her utopic fantasies.
- Stella initially seems content with her new life with Stanley, away from the superficial constraints of the Old South. However, on closer examination, **Stanley's psychological hold** over Stella ultimately results in her **eroding self-worth, subservience** and **entrapment**, to the extent that she cannot even consciously recognise it, or conceive of a life without Stanley ("I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley").



Aristotelian Tragedy

In many ways, Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* can be examined by viewing the play as a **tragedy** due to the **disintegration of the protagonist**:

Literary Context: Aristotelian Tragedies

Aristotle's famous conception of a tragedy, as cited in *Poetics*, is an **"imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude"**

By this, he means that a tragedy is primarily the consequence of deliberate human action. This action has serious consequences for the character, who is also of an **"highly renowned and prosperous"** status (source: <http://www.english.hawaii.edu/criticalink/aristotle/terms/tragedy.html>).

Other things an Aristotelian tragedy may include:

- A **tragic protagonist**, usually one of an **elevated social status**, whereby their **actions** have significant **consequences** for both themselves, and the **community**
- The tragic flaw, or **hamartia**, of the protagonist should be the **focal point** for the **disintegration of the plot**.
- 'A progression from **order to disorder**, harmony to chaos.'
- The action of the tragedy, and therefore the **unhappy or unresolved ending**, to be seen as **inevitable**
- **Audiences** feel **empathy** for the protagonist at the culmination of the **tragic catastrophe** at the end, leaving the theatre '**morally enlightened** and ennobled by their vicarious experience' of the protagonists suffering.

Therefore, there are stark similarities with the concept of an Aristotelian tragedy to this play. The two key similarities being:

1. Blanche, the **tragic protagonist**, is of an **elevated social status** in comparison to her peers. She is the epitome of the **'Southern Belle'**: an archetypal sheltered young woman of the Old South's upper socioeconomic class. Her upper class status creates a class distinction between her and Stanley.
2. Her **hamartia**, or tragic flaw, in the play is truly believing that her status as a woman should not define her treatment. As **Tamanna Farahdina** reinstates in her paper **A New Woman in an Old World** that Blanche embodies the spirit of the late-nineteenth century Feminist ideal of the **'New Woman'**, describing the desire for an **'economically independent woman who wanted social, political, and educational equality among men'**. Nevertheless, the virgin-whore dichotomy at play in 1940s America, as well as



other gender-based prejudices, mean Blanche is discarded by Mitch and despised by Stanley.



Image source: <https://cutt.ly/1xGyAdD>

- Blanche has a “**masculine energy**” in seducing the Young Man, which an **audience** of the 1940s may find **irrational and disturbing**. Thus, in a world where **female agency** is constantly **monitored and undermined**, Blanche deems it necessary to **expose** her sexual side by frequently appearing in a “**dark red satin wrapper**”.
- She attempts to **recover** her sexuality, yet is constantly **condemned** for it, while Stanley’s **unapologetic** sexual prowess is **encouraged** through being a “**richly feathered male bird amongst hens**” with no repercussions.

Blanche Dubois: the Tragic Victim

Williams constructs a **deep-rooted complexity** to Blanche’s character: While her **initial** superficial portrayal as a **sheltered Southern Belle** invokes little sympathy for her actions, towards the play’s **tragic culmination**, she rises as a **symbol of female power** who tries to break the ties of **gender hypocrisy** and inequality, but is ultimately trapped and **constrained** by New America’s **codes of hegemonic masculinity**.

Williams’ illustration of female entrapment **criticises** the **tyrannical social norms** and **internalised misogyny** in 1940’s America. Blanche is fundamentally and inevitably confined by



such social attitudes, but her descent into **lunacy** restricts her into a life of **physical and psychological ostracization**.

Her Descent into a Tragic Victim

The key scenes for her entrapment are scene one, five and ten:

Scene One	Scene Five	Scene Ten
<p>Williams uses colour symbolism to introduce Blanche as a symbol of fragile and innocent femininity. Dressed in a “white suit” with “earrings of pearl” and “white gloves”, she is already outcast as “incongruous to this setting”</p> <p>Therefore, Williams uses proleptic irony to foreshadow that her appearance of purity and innocence from her “white clothes” is far from the reality of her past endeavours with men. This is hinted at in her name, which seems to point to her grand roots - Blanche is derived from the French word for “white”. However, ‘blanche’ in English means to bleach through lack of sun exposure - it is not a real white. Accordingly, Blanche tries to appear pure but fails, scrubbing herself in the bath to expunge her sense of impurity.</p>	<p>“I don't know how much longer I can turn the trick. It isn't enough to be soft. You've got to be soft and attractive. And I-I'm fading now!”</p> <p>Blanche now understands how this world works; she realises that being 'soft' is essential to a woman's beauty and acceptance in society. Her reference to ‘fading’ is perhaps William’s comment on the invisibility of women who are deemed no longer attractive.</p> <p>Stella’s sexual subordination with Stanley represents the New American view of love, which is a lot more sexual and sensual. Blanche’s outdated American ideals of chastity, purity and frailty destroy her.</p>	<p>The triumph of brutish animal magnetism over female expression crudely depiction of female entrapment.</p> <p>Stanley's deliberate and final attempt at disintegrating Blanche's illusory facade is through rape. During her sexual assault, Stanley asserts that he and Blanche “had this date with each other from the beginning”, suggesting that this sinister act was premeditated. Regardless of the nature of their relationship - harmonious or conflict-ridden - this suggests that Blanche’s assault by Stanley was inevitable.</p>



<p>Blanche's initial depiction embodies a "delicate beauty" and illusive femininity, highlighting the social codes of the post-war female dependency on men.</p>	<p>As an archetypal lost soul, her fictitious "Darling Shep" façade accentuates her psychological vulnerability as she exclaims later in scene 10 that "What he wants is my companionship", highlighting her longing for gratitude and depth in her relationships.</p>	<p>The surreal theatricality of the scene, as illustrated through the Expressionist "lurid reflections" and the "red-letter night", serves to accentuate and foreshadow Blanche's trauma.</p> <p>This explicitly showcases that Blanche was always utterly powerless, symbolising the harsh reality of male power.</p>
<p>"But there's no door between the two rooms!" . The cramped, enclosed spaces of the apartment and the lack of privacy for Blanche accentuates and foreshadows her sense of physical entrapment.</p>	<p>"Most of my sisters' friends go north in the summer"</p> <p>Blanche is dishonest in the letter to Shep Huntleigh. What the traditional Southern Belle once may have done has now deteriorated into lies and delusion.</p>	<p>Williams signals the imminent rape through colour symbolism: Blanche appears fragile and delicate in her now "crumpled white satin gown" which contrasts with Stanley's macho and imposing "brilliant silk pyjamas".</p>
<p>"She pours half a tumbler of whisky and tosses it down. She carefully replaces the bottle.." Blanche's concealed drinking symbolises her desire to escape reality.</p>	<p>"Virgo is for virgin!"</p> <p>Blanche once again lies about her chastity as a desperate attempt to cling onto her fantasy of concealment and innocence. Williams shows that Blanche understands a woman's respect is earned by her lack of sexual experience in this world.</p>	<p>He corners her in the bedroom, refusing to move out of her way, then "springs" at her, calling her a "tiger" as he captures her.</p>
<p>"Turn that over-light off! [...] I won't be looked at in this merciless gaze!"</p>	<p>Blanche objectifies the Young Man, asserting "It would be nice to keep you", where the</p>	<p>Blanche's silent resignation as Stanley carries her "inert figure" to the bed indicates her</p>



<p>Her avoidance of direct light is a symbol for her desire to escape the reality of her troubled past. She is psychologically haunted by the ghosts of her loss —her first love, her purpose in life, her pride, and the courteous Old South society.</p> <p>Her fear of this merciless gaze acts as a microcosm for the merciless societal expectations of women, foreshadowing her mental disintegration at the end of the play.</p>	<p>possessive verb “keep” assumes <i>her</i> power over <i>him</i>.</p> <p>In reality, Blanche’s sexuality purveyed as abnormal is a patriarchal remark on how women were not seen as sexual beings.</p> <p>So, Blanche has a “masculine energy” in seducing the Young Man, which a 1940s audience may find disturbing. She reclaims her sexuality, yet is condemned for it.</p>	<p>ultimate mental and physical disintegration.</p> <p>The reason that Stanley feels he can so easily exert his power over her is because he has understood the way 1940’s society works; female submission was the norm, and if not, then it becomes female ostracization.</p>
<p>“You haven’t said a word about my appearance” While this may seem superficial, on closer examination, she understands that a woman’s worth in 1940s America was defined by her exterior appearance.</p>	<p>“People don’t see you - men don’t - don’t even admit your existence unless they are making love to you.” Williams exposes the harsh reality of female entrapment through Blanche’s reflection on a woman’s worth as purely sexual in a man’s eyes.</p>	

Blanche’s Defiance to Subservient Social Norms

Blanche’s status as a **tragic victim** stems from her **defiance**, and therefore this becomes her **tragic flaw**; the **cultural norms** of this society require her to **observe, follow and surrender**. However, she refutes and **challenges Stanley’s authority** at every given opportunity:

- She labels him using the **derogatory** term **“Polack”** (scene 1 and repeatedly throughout the play)
- Refers to him as a **“madman”** who is **“sub-human”** with an **“animal force”** and **“ape-like”** mannerisms in scene four.)



Performance: A05

In **Elia Kazan's film adaptation** (A Streetcar Named Desire, 1951) Blanche attempts to regain her power by staring at Stanley when affirming "**Deliberate cruelty is not forgivable**" in scene 10.

Many argue that it is because of the very defiance and courage in her nature that she poses the biggest threat to Stanley's alpha machismo and sexual dominion. This, in turn, results in Stanley's attempt to punish through rape, asserting that he and Blanche "**had this date with each other from the beginning**" (scene 10).

Due to this, she is portrayed as a woman that **hyper-masculine** males can treat crudely, even in her rape, with no repercussions. Williams crafts this as an explicit and heartbreaking demonstration of the extent to which **cultural savagery** destroys women's freedom and expression.

Through Blanche's **complex characterisation**, Williams reaffirms the significance of freedom of expression and, in turn, exposes the **dire consequences** of women attempting to push back in a **male-dominated society**. Therefore, Blanche represents a new, **decaying** Southern Belle. Contrastingly, the **traditional Southern Belle** was **submissive** and **irreproachable**, conforming to **traditional gender roles and expectations**.

Stella Kowalski's Passive Subservience

As **Mihaela Magdić** asserts in her paper *Gender Stereotyping in Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stella is essentially 'a **transitive type of a woman. She is neither a Southern belle nor a modern woman.**'

By this, she means that while Stella was raised as a Southern Belle, the **deep irony** and **indirect tragedy** of the play is that although she tried to break free from the old-fashioned limitations of the Old South, she is ultimately trapped and **confined** by marrying the **embodiment** of the male-dominated domains of the New South.



Unlike Blanche, who actively strives and is desperate for a change in the backwards social order, **Stella** has **passively accepted** her subservience and humiliation to the extent that she no longer views it as a problem (“I’m not in anything I want to get out of”, Scene 1), but is actually “**sort of thrilled by it.**” (scene 4). This is highlighted in Scene 4, in the aftermath of Stanley’s physical abuse of power over her in scene 3, where “**her eyes and lips**” portray a “**narcotized tranquility**” signalling to the height of Stanley’s psychological hold over her.

Their **relationship** vividly illustrates the archetypal 1940’s society composed of a **fragile, weak-minded woman** both **captivated and captured** by a **salacious, domineering man**.

Literary Criticism: A05

Stanley’s reference to the “**Napoleonic Code**” in Louisiana in Scene 2 hints at the misogyny that restricted women in American society, epitomised by Blanche and Stella - the latter of whom are economically dependent on men for survival.

As **Nina Leibman** argues, Stella’s sexuality is approved because ‘**she is not the lustful instigator but the passive respondent**’ (1987), in that, **she is only sexual in response to male sexuality**. This is the pinnacle of female entrapment; she embodies a woman exhilarated by an alpha male, who is fundamentally dependant on a man for survival - thereby overlooking and compensating for the abuse she suffers in the name of sexual desire.

This is evident in the tragic culmination of the play as, after everything, Stanley’s “**fingers find the opening of her blouse**”, and her sexual objectification is all that remains.

Key Scenes for Stella’s physical and psychological entrapment:

Scene One	Scene Three	Scene Eleven
“Gentle young woman [...] a background obviously	Stella tries to assert her authority and fights back	Stella’s series of monosyllabic replies to



quite different from her husband's" she is always depicted in relation to her husband, their difference shines light on her old Southern Belle days.

saying **"This is my house and I will talk as much as I want to!"** and later **"Drunk - drunk - animal thing"**, a phrase which illustrates Stanley's **animalistic** physicality and recalls Blanche's put downs.

Blanche (**"Yes"** **"Did you?"** **"Please Blanche"** **"Sit down and..."**) together with her guilt (**"I don't know if I did the right thing"**) in ignoring Blanche's truth and suffering **implies** her mental state of confusion and attempts at **avoiding** the truth.

However, when Stanley does not listen she understands her **limitations** as a woman in a man's world. Her resistance to him incites his violence; he **"charges after Stella"** in an **abusive demonstration** of dominance.

In a way, she seems to embody Blanche's fantasy facade throughout the play, avoiding the truth and creating a **false reality** in her mind.

Blanche introduces Stella as **"Mrs Stanley Kowalksi"** **foreshadowing** her **overarching entrapment**.

Stella does not have her own personal identity, her existence just becomes an **extension of Stanley's**.

In Scene 4, Williams exposes the extent of Stanley's **psychological manipulation** over Stella as she confesses to Blanche she was **"sort of thrilled"** by Stanley as he **"smashed all the light bulbs with the heel of my slipper!"** on their wedding night. The exclamatory language implies that she is in fact proud of it, not realising the form of physical and mental abuse she is constantly subjected to.

Stella's dangerous infatuation with Stanley poses a moral dilemma after the climax of scene 10. **Stanley's psychological hold** means that she cannot dare to believe her sister's story (**"I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley"**).

Contextually, women in 1940's America did not have a wealth of choice, especially a young woman with a baby, when it comes to leaving or challenging her husband. Stella's inheritance is controlled by her husband.



<p>“[mildly] Don’t holler at me like that!” Stella’s opening line to Stanley acts as a powerful microcosm in the play for her attempts at regaining control over her life (the very reason she left Belle Reve) but the societal expectations of female submission ultimately trap her.</p>	<p>Immediately as Stella enters, the stage directions highlight that “Stanley gives a loud whack of his hand on her thigh”.</p> <p>Here, physical violence is interlaced with sexual desire and machismo exploitation. From the harsh onomatopoeic verb “whack” to the pornification of her “thigh”, Williams gives us an insight into the objectification of women in the masculine space in 1940’s America. Stella treats her as a piece of meat.</p>	<p>“Oh my god, Eunice, help me! Don’t let them hurt her!”</p> <p>Stella displays guilt indecisiveness in her stance on Blanche’s truth. On one hand, she does not let herself believe that Stanley would do such a thing, as she understands the dangerous level of dependence she has attached to him.</p> <p>On the other hand, her gut feeling is to believe Blanche, which is why she feels so guilt-ridden and mute throughout this scene.</p>
<p>“He heaves the package at her. She cries out in protest but manages to catch it; then she laughs breathlessly”</p> <p>Just like when Stanley shatters the lightbulbs on their wedding night, Stella gets a thrill from Stanley exercising his masculine energy, no matter how destructive. Her breathless laughter here reveals the toxic nature of their relationship - abuse is tolerated or even covered over with out-of-place emotions.</p>	<p>Stanley’s territorial brood over Stella is captured in his physicality, where his violence towards Stella is encouraged by his intoxication. There is almost a primal, sub-human and animalistic sense of masculinity to him, as he bellows ‘STELL-LAHHHHH!’ connoting a mating call, recalling the sexualised initial description of him as a ‘richly feathered male bird among hens’.</p>	<p>“What have I done to my sister? Oh god, what have I done to my sister!”</p> <p>While presented as a subservient wife, unlike any of the male characters, Stella actually takes responsibility for aiding Blanche’s mental disintegration and physical ostracization.</p>



“You never did give me the chance to say much, Blanche. So I just got into the habit of being quiet around you” “You’re as plump as a little partridge” “You messy child”

Blanche treats her as a child that she can mould and treat any way that she wishes. Arguably, Stella is trapped in every way: her home, her familial relationships and through her status as a **subservient woman**, accentuated by her uncomfortable stage directions in Scene One: **“[dutifully], [a little wearily], [she is embarrassed]”**

Even after Stanley’s abuse to Stella, **“they come together with low animal moans”** and **“her eyes go blind with tenderness”**.

Their relationship revolves around a **primal** sexuality. Stanley sees relationships based on carnal lust and Stella is ultimately bound by the societal norms of **submission** expected of her.

The tragic culmination of the play is revealed as Stanley’s **“fingers find the opening of her blouse”**, and her sexual objectification is all that remains.

Williams exposes the **crude reality** of female subservience; in the end, Stella is left with nothing other than loss - her life at Belle Reve, her sister, and any chance at a mutually respectful relationship.

Alternate Interpretations: Women Enabling Their Own Downfall

Blanche’s Class Privilege

1. Blanche strips Stanley of his basic economic, social and humane worth:

Blanche’s **anti-heroine status** is highlighted in her constant use of **racial slurs** and derogatory terms against Stanley, branding him as a **“madman”** (scene 1) who is **“ape-like”** and **“sub-human”** (scene 4). She verbally attacks him using the racist and derogatory term **“Polack”** several times after he expressed his disdain and intentionally **using her class privilege to establish superiority** over a lower-class Stanley.

One can argue that **Blanche attempts a manipulation of power here**. Yet, to her misfortune, it is **society’s acceptance of the hegemonic masculinity archetype** and the **condemnation of women who try to gain power** that inhibits her control and encourages Stanley’s. His **brutish animalism** seems to be his **coping mechanism** for his constant fear of losing anything that he



deems is "his" - including his personal living space, his wife and most importantly, his **authority as an alpha male**.

2. Blanche's physical disgust towards Elysian Fields

In Scene 1, Blanche acts as if she is clearly **above all of her surroundings** as she looks disgusted at Elysian Fields, and tries to get rid of Eunice when she is politely talking to her: **"what I meant was I'd like to be left alone"**.

Going further, she constantly **embarrasses** Stella for choosing her own path in life, condemning her by saying **"What are you doing in a place like this?"** (Scene 1)

Stella's Denial of Her Circumstances

- ❖ Stella doesn't believe at all that she is trapped, exerting that she is not in a situation **"she has a desire to get out of"** (scene 4). She consciously chooses to side with her own sexual desire by making the questionable choice of Stanley over her own sister in the final scene.
- ❖ Even when **Stanley** physically **abuses** a pregnant **Stella**, **she** attributes it to his male **"nature"**. Here, she excuses all of his wrongdoings and views them through an **essentialist lens**, believing that brutish physicality is inevitable. Surprisingly, Stella is actually **thrilled** and **aroused** by his **bestial qualities**, emphasising that **"there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark"** and therefore, she uses his sexual desires as an excuse to **"make everything else seem unimportant"**.



Image source: <https://cutt.ly/VxGiza4>

Role of Men in the Entrapment of Women

Stanley as the 'Alpha Male'

The **'alpha male'** is theorised as a man who **dominates, leads and imposes** his will on others. The majority of other men wish to be him and women are undeniably attracted to him. Stanley's



alpha male tendencies are demonstrated through a series of domineering violent outbursts, his power over both Stella and Blanche, and through using animal force to reassert his authority.

- ❖ The opening description of Stanley as a working-class man wearing a “**bowling jacket**” while carrying a “**red-stained package from the butcher’s**” illustrates his **primitive masculinity** through the grotesque colour **symbolism** and **barbaric zoomorphism**.
- ❖ The “**red-stained package**” that he “**heaves [...] at her**” demonstrates Stanley’s **hyper-masculinity** as the **sole provider** of the house; he literally brings home the bread
 - Stanley **attempts to swindle Stella out of her inheritance in Scene Two**, referencing the Napoleonic Code which makes a husband the owner of his wife’s property. His attempt to intimidate his wife is signalled by the **shift from colloquial and monosyllabic lexis to standard English** as demonstrated by the phrases ‘according to which’ and ‘vice versa’ which contrasts to the simple reasoning of his argument, ‘I don’t like to be swindled’ and his initial speech ‘catch...meat!’.
- ❖ Stanley **misperceives** Blanche’s romantic desires for companionship (“**Darling Shep**”) for deception, and thus, in his brutish **destruction** of Blanche through her rape, Williams symbolises the destruction of the Old South morality.

By creating a **savage, barbaric world** where **masculine exploitation** is rife, Williams exposes the **injustice** of life for women. Their **male counterparts** will only **recognise** them for their **sexuality and subservience**.

Williams’ exploration of sexual pressure as intimately coupled with the **deterioration** of the female protagonists and is a device that reveals the immense power of a society that hides and **shames** female sexuality.



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