

AQA English Literature A-level

A Streetcar Named Desire: Themes Social Class

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INTRODUCTION

In many ways, social class is the play's **focal theme**; tensions of social class and **social pressure** lead to **physical conflict** between Blanche and Stanley, as well **psychological conflict** between Blanche and Stella. In this way, the **cultural clash** between Blanche's **upper-class Old South** ways and the **industrial New South** leads to her **ostracization** from society.

The **American Dream** and **social class** are **fundamentally interconnected**; the American Dream is a **utopian ideal** involving freedom, independence and equality of opportunity for all, irrelevant of pre-existing social class barriers. The American Dream is typically represented in **Stanley Kowalski**, as a confident and domineering **second-generation American** determined to carve his own path in his world. The **1940's infatuation** with **achieving the American Dream** is demonstrated through Stanley's deep-seated **detestation** for Blanche. To Stanley, Stella represents a **stagnant** and **materialistic** slice of society, one that has deep-seated racial and class prejudices. This prejudice inform her treatment of him, **her dismissal of as a "common", brutish outsider**. The play can be interpreted and analysed as a **clash between two cultures or classes, as well as a clash between two individuals**.

RELEVANT CONTEXTS

Biographical Context

Tennessee Williams' own familial and **cultural experiences** are reflected throughout this play. For example:

- ❑ His own mother had many similarities to Blanche; she was also a **Southern Belle** who suffered from **psychological** and mental health issues.
- ❑ There are also **parallels** between the dynamics of his family home and the dynamics of the Kowalski household; Stanley can be likened to his father, Cornelius Williams, who was allegedly a **gambler** with a **domineering** demeanour..
- ❑ As he was from the Deep South, Williams expresses the **socio-economic effects** of the Civil War (1861 - 1865) on the South. 1940s America was experiencing rapid change, involving processes like **industrialisation, immigration influx** and **the deepening of capitalism**.
- ❑ Williams chose to set a number of his plays in the South, many of them exploring the themes of immorality or decaying morality, deception and self-destruction.



Williams at work
 Image source: <https://cutt.ly/fITV873>



Literary Context

A Streetcar Named Desire can be interpreted as an echo of the Southern Gothic tradition. **Southern Gothic** was a popular **literary genre** that began in the early 19th century in response to the losses faced by the South in the aftermath of the Civil War (1861-65). An **archetypal Southern Gothic** plot involved the existence of **dark, illogical and transgressive characters**, or desires, that blurred the line between what was socially acceptable.

‘Like Williams, fellow Southern writers such as Lillian Hellman, Edgar Allan Poe and William Faulkner depicted the Old South as defeated as much by its own corruption as by the threat of a newly emerging society.’ (Old South vs New America, 2015)

A Streetcar Named Desire can be said to contain many elements of Southern Gothic, including a **lyrical writing style**, a **grotesque** protagonist who is filled with **torrid longing** and on the verge of **psychological disintegration**, as well as a sense of the **supernatural** supplied by the shadows on the wall, the eerie polka music overhead, and the sounds of echoing voices.

Social and Historical Context

Williams published *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947, in the aftermath of World War Two. A compelling reason why *A Streetcar Named Desire* was so popular was that the **taboo** embedded **themes** of social class tensions, female sexuality, homosexuality and male domination simultaneously **coexisted** with the **social dilemmas** of the time.

OLD VS NEW SOUTH

A Streetcar Named Desire is written and set post-war, at a time when America could be characterised as a **divided and changing nation**. Tennessee Williams critically explores the social tensions and **psychological subdivisions** of class structures through the **clashing characterisations** of Blanche and Stanley.

Many viewed the play as exposing the moral decay of ‘**Old South[ern]**’ **values** of rigid social hierarchy, aristocracy, culture, and etiquette as well as showcasing ‘**New South[ern]**’ **values** embodied by Stanley, a working-class character that believes in a Darwinian, **survival-of-the-fittest** struggle of the American Dream and places no value on old class hierarchies.

There is a **deep-rooted clash** between Old Southern with its **decorum** and the brutal industrial reality of urban postwar American life. Belle Reve symbolises the former, and Elysian Fields the latter.

- In the New South, domineering **masculinity** and **immigration** became key **components of the social landscape**.



- Stanley is portrayed as a **patriotic** second-generation immigrant determined to carve out his own path and be accepted into American society as someone who is “**one hundred percent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it**” (Scene 8). Hence, Stanley loses his patience with and is clearly affected by Blanche’s **ignorant racist** remarks (“**Polack**” in reference to his Polish ethnicity, repeated in several scenes). On close examination, his **declaration** of being one hundred percent American carries great **thematic significance**; Stanley has a personal attachment and direct connection to this new American society, which championed upwardly mobile immigrants and **alpha males**.
- The **Southern aristocracy** from which Blanche gains her self-worth and sense of superiority from is no longer of relevance in the play’s new social climate. However, Blanche cannot accept this and therefore it leads to her **economic, physical and psychological ostracization**.

NEW ORLEANS AND ELYSIAN FIELDS

Williams crafts New Orleans as a **cultural melting pot** in order to emphasise Blanche’s outsider status, emphasising in Scene 1 that her appearance is “**incongruous to this setting**”. Williams constructs Elysian Fields as a place where **class distinctions** don’t matter, something Blanche finds very unusual.

The opening scene constructs New Orleans as a “**cosmopolitan city**” where “[**Two women, one white and one coloured**]” are talking, showcasing a casual “**intermingling of races**” that would have seemed bizarre not long ago in a highly segregated, rural South. This may illustrate the **shift** in attitudes regarding race and class (race and class are deeply connected) in New Orleans. But crucially, the **casual racism** used in the opening pages, for example through **detaching** any sense of **personal identity** in referring to the black woman (or any non-white person) as merely “**coloured**” and the deeply offensive term “**Negro woman**”, highlights the **persistence of racism** in the New South.



Image source: <https://cutt.ly/IIUU870>

The culture shock experienced by Blanche when witnessing the intermingling of different social classes in Elysian Fields acts as a **catalyst** for her downfall. She is unable to understand the decay of her **Southern Belle grandeur** in the new society, and is incapable of viewing Stanley as anything but an **outsider in his own marriage**, due to his social class.

- This resulted in New Orleans and Elysian Fields reversing the roles for **ostracization**; here, the **upper-class** woman is ostracized as opposed to those who have a lower-class background, like Stanley, or those



who have accepted upward social mobility, like Stella.

- In **Greek Mythology**, the **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**.

Through the **symbolism** of Elysian Fields, Williams powerfully illustrates the **stark power imbalance** between not only **male and female self-expression, but also the new social order**. 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 Blanche, Elysian Fields transforms into a place of **entrapment**.

Elysian Fields represents the **disintegration of Blanche's psyche**, as a result of the **verbal and physical abuse** she tolerates from Stanley. The violence reveals the harsh reality of life in the New South (desire, male dominion, drunkenness) and strips away her **fairy-tale fantasies** of her **ideal Old Southern utopia**.

THE INTERPLAY OF GENDER AND SOCIAL CLASS



Image source: <https://cutt.ly/aIFDq1U>

The '**Southern Belle**', a term coined during the period of the **Antebellum South** in the 18th and 19th century, was a **stock character** used to describe a woman with a privileged upbringing from the Deep South's upper socioeconomic class.

At this time, there was **widespread controversy** regarding the role of women and the **societal boundaries** she may cross - including through her education, sexuality and intellect.

Williams builds a **complexity** into Blanche's **performed innocence**; as a Southern Belle, she **exploits her power** rooted in her privilege as an upper-class and sheltered white woman. She **emasculates** and **degrades** Stanley's self-worth in every way she knows how:

- She degrades Stanley by regularly binding him to the racial slur "**Polack**" as well as calling him a "**madman**" who is "**ape-like**" and has "**animal habits**", stemming from his "**sub-human**" (scene 4 and scene 1) nature. She verbally attacks him intentionally several times as a way of class privilege to **establish superiority** over a lower-class Stanley.
- Consequently, Blanche attempts a similar manipulation of power here. Yet, to her misfortune, it is society's acceptance of the **hegemonic masculinity** and the



condemnation of women who try to gain power that inhibits her control and encourages Stanley's.

- Stanley's **brutish animality** 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**.

Scene Four: Key Scene

In the aftermath of Stanley **physically abusing** Stella in Scene 3, Blanche tries to explain to Stella that she "**can get out**" of her marriage. While this may seem justified, once Stella asserts "**I'm not in anything I have a desire to get out of**", Blanche's true colours and feelings about Stanley's social class are exposed:

- Blanche's solution to Stella's broken marriage reminds her of her college love, Shep Huntleigh, and his privileged way of life. She subtly compares his upper-class lifestyle to Stanley's lower-class one by asserting "**I think of money in terms of what it does for you. But he could do it, he could certainly do it!**". Her assessment of somebody's worth is directly correlated to their socioeconomic status and access to money or wealth.
- "**What such a man has to offer is animal force [...] the only way to live with such a man is to - go to bed with him!**" A contemporary audience would find this statement bizarre as Blanche reverses the roles of women at the time; in 1940's America, women were objectified as their worth fundamentally came from their femininity and sexuality (although sexuality availability ultimately resulted in loss of respect). However, here Blanche's attempt to reverse this onto Stanley acts as a microcosm for her tragic flaw in the play - she is unable to surrender to the alpha male social norms of the period.
- Stella asks Blanche "**Don't you think your superior attitude is a bit out of place?**" This structurally recalls Scene 1 and the stage directions describing Blanche's appearance as "**incongruous to this setting**". Stella also realises Blanche's continuous attempts at asserting her upper-class superiority in the midst of her sister's personal life.
- "**Well - if you'll forgive me - he's common!**" Here, Williams truly exposes Blanche's true colours and outdated mindset. Her real cause for concern here is Stanley's "**common**" social class, rather than her superficial concern for Stella's safety and wellbeing.
- Immediately after Blanche's verbal humiliation of Stanley due to his "**common**" and "**ordinary**" status, she degrades and dehumanises him further through a sketch of his "**bestial**" and "**sub-human**" qualities as he "**acts like an animal, has an animal's habits!**"



Literary Criticism: A05

Nicola Onyett comments on Blanche's crumbling social status and her transformation as a social outcast:

She illustrates that "Blanche has become a **social outcast** because she **refuses to conform** to conventional moral values. In cruelly unveiling the truth about her scandalous past, (asserting the blunt, monosyllabic phrases "**Lie Number 1, Lie Number Two [...] in Scene 7**") Stanley strips her of her **psychological, sexual and cultural identity.**"

STANLEY'S RETALIATION AGAINST CLASS SNOBBERY

The tension between the Blanche's aristocratic, **old money** values and Stanley's working-class status is central to the events of the play. Attempting to overcome his **outsider status**, Stanley is fixated on attaining the American Dream, claiming to be "**one hundred percent American**" in Scene 8. Stanley's hatred for Blanche is fuelled by the fact that she will always dismiss him, and treat him as "**common**" due to her pretensions.

Therefore, through Blanche's attempts in projecting her Southern Belle class-based superiority over Stanley, she is misperceived by his **alpha male exterior**. As a lost soul, her fictitious "**Darling Shep**" façade accentuates her **psychological vulnerability** as she exclaims that "**What he wants is my companionship**" (Scene 10), highlighting her longing for depth in her relationships. Yet, Stanley misperceives her **romantic desires for deception**, and thus, in his **brutish demoralisation** of Blanche through her rape, Williams symbolises the destruction of the **Old South**.

A05 Literary Criticism: Marxist Lens

The **unceasing tension** between Blanche and Stanley symbolises the **clash between social classes** and the social conflict of the post-war era. In observing and analysing *A Streetcar Named Desire* through a Marxist lens, Williams exposes the **significant changes** in the **dynamic** of America's social classes during the 20th century.

Marxist theory is built on the belief that **any person can overcome their socioeconomic status** in society. This is illustrated through **Stanley's successful attempts at establishing dominance**, physically represented in overpowering Blanche in her rape. To him, his brutish win proves the **power and progression of the working class**, and their desperate desire to **escape** the prejudice and oppression of the upper class.

Verbally, his alpha male dominion can be seen in Scene 8, when he asserts "Remember what Huey Long said - Every man is a King! And I am the King around here!" His forceful attempts to regain control illustrate his **insecurities** of the women overpowering his **newfound control** and influence in the New South.



Literary Criticism (A05)

In **Elia Kazan's 1951 film adaptation**, Blanche attempts to regain her power by staring at Stanley when affirming “**Deliberate cruelty is not forgivable**”. However, Williams concentrates on Stanley’s **overpowering antagonism** in the masculine space of the Poker Night in Scene 3.

- During the Poker Night, the stage directions point to the night’s “**lurid nocturnal brilliance**” accentuating the men’s primitive natures in the vibrancy, yet menacing nature, of the adjective “lurid”. Williams draws parallels between the flamboyance of the painting, to the men’s “**coloured shirts, solid blues, a purple, a red-and-white check**”, inextricably binding harsh colours with male aggression.
- Blanche’s rejects bold lighting. Just as the Old South rapidly has declined from its former glory, so has Blanche’s status. This she metaphorically masks by moving “**out of the yellow streak of light**” in her encounter with Mitch, remaining in the half-light façade of her fantasies.

Stanley’s excessive displays of masculinity in Blanche’s presence stem from the fact that **Blanche represents a threat to his self-worth**, due to her constant disparagement of him in terms of his social class and ethnicity.

These **warzones of power** and **social class** are **mirrored** within the walls of the Kowalski apartment. Stanley’s **territorial brood** is exposed when he screams “**Hey, canary bird! Toots! Get OUT of the BATHROOM!**” in Scene 7. Here, Stanley asserts his **verbal dominance** over a vulnerable Blanche, completely **degrading her** through his **dehumanising, diminishing** comparison of to a bird. The bathroom is sacred to Blanche as the only place she can find privacy and take respite in her fantasies.

His **vicious language** cruelly transfigures her happiness into a **state of mental chaos**. The chaos in this scene symbolises his utter contempt for her upper-class sensibilities and snobbery (which are also informed by a sense of racial superiority).

Essentially, Blanche transforms into an **outsider** in the **New World** due to her **rigid, classist mindset**. Her old world delicacies, her sexuality and defiance against Stanley’s ‘American Dream’ fantasy become her **greatest flaw**, leading to her inevitable ostracization.

BRITISH MASCULINE POWER IN THE NEW SOUTH

As **immigration** and **masculinity** became the key drivers of the New World, Williams exposes the **cultural shift** in **power dynamics** with **masculine power** overtaking any remaining power of the class system.



Close Reading: A01

Class is reflected by the different language used by and to describe Blanche and Stanley:

- ❑ The stage directions describing Stanley use rough, 'blue-collar' language to reflect his background, for example "**feathered male bird among hens**", "**gaudy seed-bearer**" and "**crude images**" (scene 1).
- ❑ Contrastingly, Blanche uses 'proper', ornamented language seen through her polite expressions "**if you don't mind**" and archaic phrases such as "**coin of the realm!**" (scene 4)

The stark contrast in their chosen mode of expression exposes the shifting values of the new industrial society of post-war New Orleans, abandoning its former antebellum values.

STANLEY'S PHYSICAL POWER

Sexual dominion and violence were the key characteristics of the New American Man. **Stanley** is the **embodiment** of the **archetypal machismo** and as well as the **capitalist greed** which permeates the **post-war landscape**. In these **male-dominated domains**, anxieties over **power** and position are defined and expressed through **physical, and often sexualized, acts of violence**.

Many have argued that the **fundamental dynamic** of Stanley and Stella's **relationship** is **inconceivable** or unrealistic at this time period.

For a contemporary audience, it is **difficult to comprehend** how they would have even **crossed paths** when considering the **class-segregated nature** of 1940's America.

Many argue that **Stanley's unforgivable violence towards Blanche in Scene 10** happens because she is the one who poses a **biggest threat to his self-image**. To a large portion of a contemporary audience, Stanley would have symbolised a **working class, New American hero**. His **alpha male mannerisms** reflect the type of masculinity **celebrated** in the New South - one that is **unapologetically sexual, savage and overpowering**.



MITCH'S PSYCHOLOGICAL POWER

Mitch's **dual characterisation** in the play is key to understanding the **layers of masculine power**, regardless of his working-class background, in the New South.

The audience is given a **false sense of security** about Mitch, since Williams presents him as having an almost **boyish fragility** and a gentlemanly nature - things that Blanche finds endearing.



Image source: <https://cutt.ly/SI8olcu>

- This is evident in her interpretation of Mitch as **“superior to the others”**. As the stage directions point out, Mitch has an **“awkward courtesy”** when he politely addresses Blanche **“How do you do, Miss DuBois?”**
- Here, Williams exposes the **derogatory mindset** of this society; to treat a woman with respect, rather than to sexually commodify her as Stanley does (to both Stella and Blanche as explored earlier), is uncommon, and therefore Mitch's curtesy is **“awkward”**.

Later on in the play, Mitch's **gentlemanly nature** is revealed to be a facade and he is shown to be no different from the other men:

- In Scene Nine, when he discovers that she is not the **emblem of purity** he desires. In Scene 9, he tells her **“You're not clean enough to bring in a house with my mother”**. This catalyses the dismantling of her psyche.
- He shares the same **sexist attitudes towards female sexuality** that were common in the New South, casually degrading women when they do not fit his ideals of purity.

Ultimately, Williams sketches the **destruction of Old Southern morality** and the **triumph of New Southern values** through Blanche's **ostracization** from New Orleans society. This reflects the contemporary **infatuation** with the American Dream, with its supposed opportunities for **social mobility** and dismissal of old **hierarchies** of **class**.



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