Edexcel English Literature A-level

A Streetcar Named Desire: Themes

Death and Desire

INTRODUCTION

In *A Streetcar Named Desire,* the themes of **death and desire** permeate most of the play's events. Williams crafts these two elements as **extremely interconnected**, and relates them to Blanche's **downfall** and her tragic ostracization from society.

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This is essentially through all of the **loss** she has experienced in her life (most prominently the **death** of her late ex-husband, Allan Gray) and her desire to free herself from the **boundaries** of her gender and **express** her sexuality freely.

The Liebestod Tradition - Derived from German origins, **Liebestod** means **'love death'** and is interpreted as an erotic union achieved by lovers, solely through or after death. Therefore, the streetcars named **'Desire'** and **'Cemeteries'** (Scene 1) become one of *A Streetcar Named Desire's* focal images, **explicitly linking sex and death, gaining coherence through the Liebestod tradition.**

The **cyclical structure** of the play and Williams' **conscious intertwining** of images of **death and desire** also add to this tradition, exposing the disastrous consequences for those who try to escape the expected and accepted gender norms of this society.

RELEVANT CONTEXTS

Elysian Fields

Williams constructs Elysian Fields as a **catalyst** for Blanche's downfall. More specifically, Elysian Fields represents the sheer interconnectedness of death and desire. This is because in **Greek Mythology** Elysian Fields became the resting ground reserved for the 'blessed dead', or **deceased, virtuous heroes.**

- Through the **symbolism** of Elysian Fields, Williams powerfully illustrates the inescapable fate as Blanche arrives in a **"streetcar named Desire"** and then transfers to Elysian Fields in a streetcar named **"Cemeteries"** (Scene 1).
- This journey is significant on both a literal and figurative level. Symbolically, the **"Cemeteries"** streetcar connotes death and destruction, **foreshadowing** Blanche's **mental disintegration** and **spiritual death** in the tragic culmination of the play. The trams' destinations reveal how destructive sexual passion is and how intertwined it is with death, and also indicate the **inescapability of fate.**

- Contrastingly, for Stanley, Elysian Fields serves as a **sanctuary** for his **desires**, pleasures and **masculine dominion**, represented through his bowling, playing poker and drinking.
- For him, it is his **safe space** where he unapologetically satiates his desires, while for **Blanche** Elysian Fields quickly becomes into a place of **misery and entrapment.**

Literary Criticism: A05

Feminist criticism would examine Stanley and Stella's marriage with a particular focus on how Stella is treated.

The power imbalance in their relationship and Stanley's lack of respect for Stella is a **social commentary on the treatment of women**.
In their marriage, **sex and power are closely linked;** it is Stanley's desire and Stella's blind obedience that results in the metaphorical death of her freedom, as **"Stanley doesn't give [her] a regular allowance"** (Scene 4).
Feminist critics would therefore argue that both Stella and Blanche are victims of patriarchal oppression.

Role of Women

1940's American society was one where women gained their **value** from their relationships with men, whom they were often dependent on economically (WW2 had seen record numbers of women enter the workforce, but once the war was over, federal and civilian policies replaced women workers with men and women largely returned to the domestic sphere). Through its **tragic portrayal** of **female entrapment**, Williams suggests that **hegemonic masculinity** and **female inferiority** are inescapable. More specifically, this is explored through the intentional crafting of **socially subordinate female characters** (Blanche and Stella) who are fundamentally **dependent on men** for survival. Blanche and Stella are both **confined** within their **physical and psychological worlds,** as we will explore later. Williams depicts the male characters as **responsible** for the Stella's restricted freedom and Blanche's **disintegrating** psyche.

Belle Reve

'Belle Reve' literally translates to **'Beautiful Dream'** in French, reminiscent of the days in which Louisiana was part of the French domain. The name suggests a **facade,** reflecting that fact Blanche's desires and visions for the future are simply beautiful fantasies. The **dark undertones** of the name signify that the **grandeur** of the DuBois family is **fading** and Blanche's status as a **decaying Southern Belle** is revealed - as all desires must come to an end.

Alternatively, Belle Reve acts as the **physical representation** of the loss Blanche has suffered, transforming the **plantation** into a **symbol of death and decay** as she vividly recollects her loss. In Scene One, she emphasises **"The loss – the loss …"** she has endured, and her **equivocation** exposes how difficult she finds it to speak of what has happened.

SYMBOLS OF DEATH

Allan Gray's Suicide

The **ostracization** of anybody who doesn't display **hegemonic masculinity** (in this case due to Allan's homosexuality) is clear through the damning of Blanche's late husband Allan Gray.

Allan never appears in the play; he is simply a **symbol of her traumatic past**. Many psychologists and psychiatrists in 1940's America, including the **American Psychiatric Association**, considered homosexuality a mental illness or even a sociopathic personality disturbance. Many argue that his **elimination** from the play is rooted in his **outward defiance** to social norms of heterosexuality and machistic exploitation, exposing the **true stagnance** and **progressive facade** of this New South society.

These horrific attitudes towards homosexuality are revealed at various moments. Stella, for examples, describes Allan as a **"beautiful and talented young man"** but also a mere **"degenerate"** (Scene Seven) - the latter appellation on the basis of his sexuality. This term reveals her deep moral disgust for gay people. Through her remark and through the plas as a whole, Williams **exposes** the lack of progression in the New South; It is these **discriminatory** views that **inhibit** social mobility, allowing only white heterosexual, alpha males the privilege of the American Dream.

Blanche's Metaphorical Death

It'ss as if Blanche's **fate** as an **outsider** is sealed from the moment she enters New Orleans, as the stage directions in Scene 1 reveal that **"her appearance is incongruence to this setting".** This outsider status never disappears for Blanche, and ultimately acts as a **catalyst** for her **metaphorical and social death** that comes in the form of her **ostracization from society**.

In turn, Williams subtly foreshadows Blanche's metaphorical death through her **overarching entrapment** in the play:

1. Self-fulfilled entrapment

Blanche's sense of value and worth is informed by her **'Southern Belle'** roots. The 'Southern Belle', 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.**

This is revealed through the **subtle revelations** of Blanche's **high expectations**, such as during the poker game in Scene 11 when Blanche says to the men **"Please don't get up. I'm only passing through"** which highlights her desire for the return to the **Old South formalities**.

Of course, the irony is that the **men absolutely do not respect her** - tragically revealed through her rape.

Another more obvious aspect of the play in which she catalyses her own entrapment through her Southern Belle grandeur is her attitude towards **Stanley's ethnicity.** Like the **archetypal** Southern Belle**,** she exploits her **power** rooted in her **privilege** as an upper-class and sheltered white woman by **emasculating** him:

- She **degrades** Stanley by regularly binding him to the racial slur **"Polack".** She also calls him a **"madman"** who is **"ape-like"**, has **"animal habits"** and is **"sub-human"** (scene 4 and scene 1).
- She verbally **attacks** him several times, using her upper class status as a weapon, a way of establishing **superiority** over a lower-class Stanley.

To her misfortune, it is **society's acceptance** of **hegemonic masculinity** and the condemnation of women who try to gain power that inhibits her control and catalyses her own metaphorical death and mental disintegration.

2. <u>Stanley's overpowering traits</u>

Blanche's entrapment in the play is predominantly rooted in Stanley's alpha male tendencies, demonstrated by his domineering violent outbursts and his use of animal force to reassert his authority.

- The Kowalski apartment is a **warzone of power**. Stanley's **territorial brood** is exposed when he screams **"Hey, canary bird! Toots! Get *OUT* of the *BATHROOM*!"** in Scene 7. Stanley asserts his **verbal dominance** over a vulnerable Blanche, **degrading her** through the **dehumanising** comparison to a bird. The bathroom for Blanche is her only space of freedom, a place where she can indulge fantasies as respite from a life she is ashamed of.
- His **vicious language** cruelly transfigures her happiness into a **state of mental chaos**. The chaos in this scene symbolises his utter contempt of the upper-class sentiment (which is also informed by a sense of racial superiority) which Blanche reaffirms with the racial slur **'Polack'** indicating the superiority she feels vis-a-vis the supposed immigrant, Stanley.

Many argue that **Stanley's unforgivable antagonism towards Blanche** throughout the play occurs because, ultimately, she is the one that poses the **biggest threat** to both his **social status and power as a man**. He resents and is unused to being undermined; as an 'alpha male' he is used to respect, and her disrespect on the basis on his class position and 'not-quite-white' ethnicity (see Starkey, References) is **intolerable** to him.

Blanche's descent into **lunacy** restricts her into a life of **physical and psychological ostracization.** Essentially, Blanche becomes an **outsider in the New World**. Her old-world delicate sensibility, her sexuality and defiance of Stanley's 'American Dream' fantasy become her **greatest flaws,** leading to her **symbolic death**.

Literary Criticism: A05

Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) **'Politeness Theory'** (also known as the 'face threatening acts') is particularly relevant to the focal antagonism and **fierce opposition** of Blanche versus Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire.*

Their framework constitutes of an outward expression, the **face**, which is defined as 'your public self-image' to explain politeness. The two key components of this face include:

1. **Positive face:** the need for our actions to be desirable to other people as well as ourselves (e.g. positive affirmation through language).
2. **Negative face:** the desire for our actions to be unhindered and unimposed on by others. (e.g. our negative face is threatened when someone interrupts us because it impedes our desire to speak.)

Crucially, politeness therefore includes both parties showing an awareness and appreciation of others' face needs. If verbal or physical actions threaten someone's face, they become **face threatening acts (FTA).**

This concept is clear in both Blanche and Stanley's characterisation. Since Blanche's presence and **her derogatory remarks against Stanley's ethnicity** ("Polack") directly undermines his self-worth, **she threatens his face.** Many argue that this is the fundamental reason why Stanley's brutish physicality is overarchingly targeted towards her.

Alternatively, Blanche is arguably just as direct as Stanley's more obvious, brutish characterisation. Yet, reminiscing about her **'Southern Belle'** upbringing, she can be far more polite - mitigating her FTAs with greater sensitivity.

3. Blanche's defiance of female norms of sexual purity

The third way in which her entrapment catalyses her metaphorical death at the end of the play is her **desire** to project her **sexuality freely**. In 1940's America, women were not viewed as individually sexual - only **sexually respondent,** as in response to **masculine desire.**

Blanche realises this when she says in Scene 5 that **"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 that woman's worth is

contingent on their sexual availability; according to Blanche, it is only when men see a woman through a sexual lens that they are willing to acknowledge her existence. This is **paradoxical**; according to the double sexual standards of 1940s America, a women's sexual licentiousness would also make her morally bankrupt, 'used goods'. Thus, Blanche's statement illustrates the trap women are in; their existence is only acknowledged when they are sexually attractive or available, yet sexual availability also brings loss of respect.

Blanche's behaviour with the Young Man in Scene 5 further illustrates her **defiance of gender norms**. Unusually, she **objectifies** the Young Man, asserting **"It would be nice to keep you",** where the possessive verb **"keep"** assumes **her** power over him. In reality, Blanche's sexuality would have been interpreted as **abnormal or pathological** to a contemporary audience, since only men's sexual drives were considered **healthy**.

So, Blanche has a **"masculine energy"** in seducing the Young Man, which an audience of the 1940s may find **disturbing**. She also exposes her sexual side by frequently appearing in a **"dark red satin wrapper"**.

However, while she **reclaims** her sexuality, she is **condemned** for it, while Stanley's unapologetic sexual prowess is **encouraged** through being a **"male bird amongst hens"** with no repercussions. Williams' exploration of sexual pressure as intimately tied to the deterioration of the female protagonist, is a device to reveal the **immense power** of a society that **shapes, shelters, and shames female sexuality**, ultimately causing her metaphorical death.

INTERRELATION OF DEATH AND DESIRE

Stella's Characterisation

Unlike Blanche, whose **metaphorical death** is foretold from Scene One, Stella's symbolic demise is more nuanced and caused by her **entrapment** in her marriage.

Literary Criticism: A05

Stanley's reference to the **"Napoleonic Code"** in Louisiana in Scene 2 hints at the cultural misogyny that restricted women in American society, epitomised in Blanche and Stella - both of which are constrained by social expectations of dependence 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 dependent 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.

Stella appears to be so consumed and blinded by her desire for Stanley that she ignores not only his brutish rape of her sister **("I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley"**, Scene 10**)** but also Stanley's physical assault on herself.

Scene 3: The Poker Night

- In Scene 3, Williams reveals how **machistic exploitation** is interlaced with **sexual desire** in Stanley and Stella's marriage. The stage directions indicate that **"Stanley gives a loud whack of his hand on her thigh"** proleptically underlining the notion that the sexualised **male gaze** drives their relationship. 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.
- Chaos and violence are at the heart of the action in this scene, where Stanley **"tosses the instrument (radio) out of the window"** and soon after, the stage directions indicate that **"Stanley charges after Stella"** in another display of **male dominance/ violence.**

Scene 4: The Aftermath

- Even after the unforgivable chaos of Scene 3, Stella has a **"narcotized tranquillity"** about her, as their sexual desire is all that is remembered.
- She is in fact **thrilled** and **aroused** by his **bestial qualities,** justifying herself by asserting that **"there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark"** and that this was nothing - he actually **"smashed all the light-bulbs with the heel of my slipper!"** on her wedding night. Her **exclamatory language** in the latter justification especially signals the **twisted appreciation** she has for his toxic and **violent demonstrations of masculinity** - she appears to be proud of his excessive physicality.
- She asserts that **"I am not in anything that I have a desire to get out of",** which completely baffles Blanche, who asserts that **"You're married to a madman!"**
- Stella uses his sexual desires as an excuse everything else or, in her words, **"make everything else seem unimportant".**

Her absolute and deliberate denial of her dire circumstances perfectly illustrates the **twisted interconnection of death and desire** which is one of the play's thematics; Stella's **submission** to her abusive partner serves as a **social commentary** on women's entrapment.

MASCULINE DESIRE

The **interrelation of death and desire** is most apparent in the presentation of **masculine exploitation** and desire which **catalyses** the disintegration of the **female protagonists.**

For example, the reason that Stanley feels he can so easily exert his power over her is that he has fully understood the way **1940's society** works; **female submission** was the norm. If a female refuses to submit, they become **ostracized.**

Image source: https://cutt.ly/sxzf4tB

Scene 10: The Rape

Stanley's **unapologetic sexuality** and the deterioration of **Blanche's psyche** is immensely interconnected. He radiates a raw, violent and brutish animal magnetism throughout the play. Whenever his **machismo** is challenged by those who (on the basis of their femininity) are his **inferiors** (Stella and Blanche) his natural response is to physically reassert his masculinity and power through **sexual abuse, violence or both.**

- The surreal theatricality of the scene, as illustrated through the Expressionist use of colour in the **"lurid reflections"** and the **"red-letter night"**, accentuates and foreshadows Blanche's trauma.
- Williams signals the imminent rape through the colour symbolism of Blanche's fragile delicacy in her now **"crumpled white satin gown"** as opposed to Stanley's **"brilliant silk pyjamas"**.
- Williams uses primordial, jungle-like violence in this chaotic scene, as the **"night is filled with inhuman voices like cries in a jungle flame"**. Stanley's animalistic world of desire is emerging. Blanche's **"Darling Shep"** fantasy is gradually destroyed, and she is seeing his world for what it is.
- He corners her in the bedroom, refusing to move out of her way, and then **"springs"** at her, calling out **"tiger"** as he captures her. The extreme animalistic language used exposes that he views her as a sort of **prey** to catch. Blanche's silent resignation as Stanley carries her **"inert figure"** to the bed indicates her ultimate mental and physical disintegration - her symbolic death.

Ultimately, **Stanley** emerges **victorious** as he understands and acts according to the **expected norms of male superiority** in society. Contrastingly, Blanche is physically ostracized and abused as she continually fails to behave as though she is subordinate to him. Therefore, Williams intentionally **couples the themes of death and desire** to show how **dangerous** a combination they could be for those who are not socially dominant, like women, no matter their efforts to challenge authority.

Mitch's Role in Blanche's Deterioration

Mitch's **dual characterisation** in the play, subtly but surely, causes Blanche's mental deterioration. Unlike Stanley, Mitch is the only person that Blanche truly **trusts** and sees a future with. Thus, when his true colours are revealed she is truly hurt.

Therefore, it can be argued that Mitch has just as **significant** a role in her **metaphorical death** as **Stanley:**

- Firstly, Williams creates a false sense of security through Mitch's presentation: he displays an almost **boyish fragility that stands in direct contrast to Stanley's brutish strength.** This fragility is arguably what Blanche found so endearing about him.
- Unlike Stanley, Mitch is **sensitive**. This is evident when he contemplates leaving the Poker night due to his care for his **"sick mother"**, saying that **"she don't go to sleep until I come in at night."** As the stage directions point out, Mitch has an **"awkward courtesy"** when he politely addresses Blanche **"How do you do, Miss DuBois?"** This wins him over to Blanche, who misses old-world Southern chivalry with its implied respect of women.

Scene 9: The Facade Falls

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

- Scene 9 is laced with **imagery** of death, both literal and metaphorical, in line with the Liebestod Tradition. As Mitch attempts to force Blanche into the light to **metaphorically** strip her of her illusions **("Let's turn the light on", "he tears the paper lantern off the light-bulb"),** Blanche is forced to confront her past. She recollects the **"death of Allan"** and makes herself vulnerable when she admits that she **"had many intimacies with strangers" (Scene 9).**
- In Scene 11, Stanley also makes Blanche the target of his violent mannerisms on; he **"seizes the paper lantern, tearing it off the light-bulb"** while Blanche **"cries out as if the lantern was herself"**. The violent destruction of the lantern foreshadows her **symbolic death**.

This soon transforms into Blanche's metaphorical death in the play.

- She realises that she was **“asking - hoping - for too much!”** (Scene Nine) in that this world was not the utopian ideal she dreamt of. This is not the kind of world where a bold, sexually confident woman can express herself without being subject to derogatory insults from her male counterparts. Even seemingly decent ‘gentlemen’ like Mitch are **corrupted** by ideas about female purity. His misogynistic claim that **“you’re not clean enough to bring in a house with my mother” (Scene 9)** acts as a **catalyst** for Blanche’s p**sychological disintegration.**
- This is exacerbated by Mitch’s derogatory accusation of Blanche **“lapping it up all summer like a wild cat!”** once he discovers her sexual history. Instead of sympathising or supporting her when she reveals that her sexual past was due to the demise of her ex-husband, Mitch degrades her by portraying her as mere animal **“wild cat”**. The **masculine fixation** on **female chastity** is revealed, **corrupting** even the seemingly decent men of New Orleans.

It is at this moment where the **cyclical structure** of the play is evident.

- We started with Scene 1, in which death and desire are intertwined through the streetcars’ destinations **(“Desire” and “Cemeteries”)**. This **structural mirroring** is evident in Scene 9.
- Like her late husband Allan, whose homosexuality tragically led to his death, Blanche is an **emblem** of the tragic interrelationship of sex and death.
- In Scene 9, the ominous presence of the Mexican Woman’s **“Flores para los muertos”** (translating into ‘Flowers for the dead’) acts as a visual reminder of death and adds to the **Expressionist** use of sound to externalise Blanche’s inner feelings. Immediately, the Varsouviana **“polka tune fades in”** which Williams uses as a **motif** to introduce Blanche’s gradual descent into insanity.
- The Varsouviana Polka, only **diegetic** for Blanche and **symbolic** of her inability to escape her past, is symbolic of Blanche losing her tenuous grasp on reality.
- Soon after, images of death and desire overlap and intertwine in Blanche’s psyche. The scene has dark undertones as Blanche explains to Mitch that **“I used to sit here and she used to sit over there, and death was as close as you are”.**
- Her next statement, that **“the opposite is desire”** acts as a **microcosm f**or the whole play; Williams hints at the **destructive and dangerous** relationship between death and desire, especially for those who do not conform to the social codes of heterosexual masculine dominance and female submission. Those who do not submit, and wish instead to follow their desires, fall to their tragic deaths, either literal (like Allan Gray) or metaphorical (through Blanche’s ostracization from society).

Ultimately, Williams paints the **destruction of the Old South** and triumph of the **New South** through Blanche’s very inevitable **ostracization** from this society.

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