

Edexcel English Literature A- level

A Streetcar Named Desire: Themes Fantasy and Delusion

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Fantasy and delusion catalyse the downfall of *A Streetcar Named Desire*'s conflicted protagonist, Blanche.

RELEVANT CONTEXTS

Social and Historical Context

Gender Roles and Norms

In the New South, **masculinity** is a **key component** of the **American social landscape**. **Stanley** is the **embodiment** of the **archetypal machismo** and **capitalist greed** which permeates this **landscape**. He is an **emblem** of the **New America**, and of the **American Dream utopia**, which enable his upward mobility. In this post-war America, women, who had **entered the workforce** to fill the roles of the men fighting overseas. However, with the conclusion of the War, women were expected to return to **domesticity**. Maria Cristina Santana calls this transformation a **gender reconversion**; the image of the perfect housewife took the place of Rosie the Riveter and women were pushed back into their **subordinate roles**. This context is important to understanding Blanche's delusions.



Image source: <https://cutt.ly/cl8pK7q>

Through the **physical and psychological dismantling** of Blanche's agency and of her desperate attempts to create a fantasy world, Williams brutally explores the extent to which **female expression, sexuality and freedom** can be **accepted** before its condemnation or **ostracization**.

On closer examination, an analysis of Stella illustrates an entirely different aspect of fantasy and delusion. Her **denial of the toxicity** of her marriage - a toxicity which takes the form of Stanley's physical abuse in Scene 3 and as well as psychological manipulation by turning her against her sister - acts as the play's most significant **indirect delusion**. Williams creates Stella as ignorant to the reality of her marriage in order to expose women's **dependence** on men for survival in 1940s America, highlighting the inevitability of female entrapment.



Grade Booster

When Blanche objectifies the Young Man, she asserts “**It would be nice to keep you**”. The possessive verb “keep” assumes **her power over him**. The construction of Blanche’s sexuality as ‘abnormal’ is a patriarchal remark on how **women were not seen as sexual beings, only for them to be sexually objectified by men**.

So, Blanche has a “**masculine energy**” in seducing the Young Man, which an audience of the 1940s would have found disturbing. In a world where female agency is constantly monitored and repressed, Blanche deems it necessary to expose her sexual side by frequently appearing in a “**dark red satin wrapper**”. She flaunts her sexuality but is condemned for it, while Stanley’s unapologetic sexual prowess is encouraged as the result of being a “**male bird amongst hens**” with no repercussions.

The Southern Belle

- The ‘Southern Belle’, coined during the period of the **Antebellum South** (a period in the history of the Southern United States lasting from the late 18th century until the start of the American Civil War in 1861), was a **stock character**, a woman with a **privileged upbringing** from the **Deep South’s upper socioeconomic class**.
- At this time, there was extensive controversy regarding the role of women and the **societal boundaries** they may cross - including through education, sexuality, intellect and generally upholding traditional southern values.

Blanche’s Southern Belle status, symbolic of the **ostentatious values** of the Old South, is central to her desperate attempts at clinging onto a fantasy world. Williams constructs a **complexity** to Blanche’s **performed innocence**; as a Southern Belle, she exploits her power rooted in her privilege as an upper-class and sheltered white woman. Blanche, the **tragic protagonist**, is of **elevated social status** in comparison to her peers.

Her **upper-class status**, illustrated by her old plantation home of Belle Reve, creates a class distinction between her and Stanley. Blanche symbolises **Old South privilege** and is the stereotypical Southern Belle. Nevertheless, her privilege is almost gone, lost as her family fortune and estate have been lost. In order to regain a sense of her superiority, she emasculates and degrades Stanley by calling “**Polack**” (**Scene 1** and repeatedly throughout the play) and a “**madman**” as well as labelling him “**sub-human**” and “**ape-like**” in Scene 4.



Literary Criticism: A05

Through a New Historicist critical lens, we can interpret Blanche's constant attempts at undermining Stanley's self-worth as a social commentary on the stagnance of the Old South morality.

She is unable to extricate her privilege from the ways of life in the new world. Her failed attempts at restoring her class privilege highlight her status as a decaying Southern Belle.

Elysian Fields

Through the **symbolism** of Elysian Fields, Williams images the play's sinister relation between Blanche's fantasy utopia and the harsh realities of the new world.



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

In the opening scene, Blanche exclaims that **“They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, and transfer to one called Cemeteries, and ride six blocks and get off at—Elysian Fields!”**

- Here, Williams reveals the **intimate link** between Blanche's desires and the final destruction of her fantasies.
- 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**.
- Death is overtly present in the play through her late husband's demise and the huge subconscious burden it places on her. She also **metaphorically dies** when her psyche disintegrates following her rape.



It could be argued that Blanche's **desire** to **project her femininity and sexuality** freely with **no repercussions** (which is not yet revealed in the opening scene) leads to her **figurative death**.

Literary Context

Plastic and Expressionist Theatre

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams developed and experimented with what he coined as '**plastic theatre**': a non-realist style that exploits **Expressionist devices** to symbolically represent the psyche of his protagonists.

Expressionist devices were those in which **depictions of reality** were chaotically **distorted** in order to convey and physically express the character's psyche or internal desires. These **highlight** the delusion of Blanche's fantasy world and the **inevitability**, and **inescapability**, of her tragic fate.

Examples of Expressionist devices in *A Streetcar Named Desire* include:

- **Contrast in the costumes:** the intentional contrast between Stanley and Blanche in the first scene:
 1. Our first impression of **Stanley**, in Act One, is an audacious, vivid and unapologetically sexual alpha male. He is "**roughly dressed**" in "**blue denim work clothes**" who "**heaves**" a package of meat carelessly towards his wife.
 2. Contrasting Blanche is dressed to showcase her supposedly fragile and innocent bourgeois femininity. In her "**white suit**", "**earrings of pearl**" and "**white gloves**", she is already as "**incongruous to this setting**", showing her to be delusional in her expectations of New Orleans. The incongruence of her dress and the setting reveals the deludedness of Blanche's belief that she can start afresh and make a new life for herself, while still retaining her class privilege and clinging to her Old Southern snobberies.
- **Varsouviana Polka:** Blanche begins to lose her tenuous grasp on reality through the "**Varsouviana polka**" in Scene 7, only **diegetic** for Blanche and **symbolic** of her inability to escape her past.

Williams perceived the visible and audible components of theatre to be able to illustrate the psychological decline of his protagonist, Blanche, to a contemporary audience.

- **Blue Piano:** The sound of the blue piano becomes a motif that symbolises all that Blanche has lost in her life. This is explored later in this document!



Blanche's Fantasy and Façade

Blanche's desperation to **cling** to her **illusions** stem from all the loss she has faced— her family, Belle Reve, Allen Grey and the expulsion she faces from society for her sexuality. In turn, we can interpret her fantasies, namely her “**Darling Shep**” (**Scene 5**) facade, as a cry for help.

Therefore, Williams constructs Blanche's vulnerability here as a **social commentary** on the wider female desire to escape **excessive judgement** from society and gain **mutual respect** from their male counterparts.

Belle Reve

Williams constructs Belle Reve as wholly **symbolic** of Blanche's **illusory existence**. The old plantation's name, Belle Reve, is a French name that literally translates into '*beautiful dream*' suggesting and **symbolic** of her past and her desire for the future as a **beautiful fantasy**.

What is interesting is that unlike the numerous other illusions that Blanche truly believes in, such as her “**Darling Shep**” (scene 5) fantasy, we are introduced to Belle Reve as one of the only ones that truly existed, but gradually lost its glamour and **disintegrated** into **oblivion**. This disintegration mirrors Blanche's **fading beauty**.



Blanche Through a Psychoanalytic Lens

A05: Psychoanalytic Criticism

Fantasy as Blanche's Defense Mechanism

As illustrated by **Ruhina Jesmin** in her paper *A Psychoanalytic Insight Into Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire*, **Blanche has an infatuation with “replacing reality with fantastic embodiments or illusion”** in order to shelter, or defend, herself from the harsh realities of the New World.

“She has taken unacceptable impulses into acceptable forms by unconsciously blocking the impulses such as superego and thereby reducing agony for the earlier traumatic experiences left indelible marks on her mind, and anxiety for survival.”

Through **Freudian theory**, the purpose of the superego is to **‘suppress entirely any urges or desires** of the id that are considered wrong or **socially unacceptable’** such as sex, desire and aggression.

In turn, Blanche's ‘unacceptable impulses’ echo her **inner desire to project her sexuality freely**, like the men in the play, but this is deemed socially abhorrent and grounds for ostracization in the savage interplay of this world.

Motifs

Through the various motifs that symbolise her **fantasy or illusory world**, Williams illustrates that his **protagonist's complexity** does not rise from her background as a **Southern Belle** trying to fit into the New World, but actually from her constant attempts to mask her true self through her **facades**.

Blanche's Repetitive Bathing

Through Blanche's **“long, hot baths”** that she takes numerous times a day **“for her nerves” (Scene 8)**, Williams conveys her fragile mental state; it transforms into a symbol of her **delusional attempts** at washing away her past. Her bathing becomes her only physical state of privacy where she can **fantasise** about what the world **“ought”** to be. Her endless bathing suggests how she subconsciously attempts to wash away her past, but struggles, and metaphorically emerges through a sort of **water purgatory**.



Williams deliberately uses Stanley's presence either after or during Blanche's baths to signify the **disintegration of her fantasy world**, bringing her back to the harsh reality from which she cannot escape.

For example, in Scene 7, Stanley's climactic assertion "**Hey, canary bird! Toots! Get OUT of the BATHROOM!**" tragically establishes his verbal dominance over a vulnerable Blanche. He completely **degrades** her through the animalistic and **dehumanising** comparison of her mannerisms to a bird. It can be argued that this is an attempt to undermine her own self-worth, just as she attempt to undermine his by calling his mannerisms "**ape-like**".



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

The bathroom for Blanche is symbolic of her only **physical space** of freedom and possibility in her fantasies. Therefore, his vicious language cruelly **transforms** her happiness into a **mental state of chaos**.

Expressionist Use of Music

Williams uses the power of music to **blur** the **boundaries** between the **interior** and the **exterior** spaces of Blanche's psyche. He does this through the contrasting use of the Varsouviana Polka and the Blue Piano:

Varsouviana Polka

Reminiscent of the Expressionist techniques and Plastic Theatre he uses later in the play, Williams uses **dramatic irony** in the presentation of the Varsouviana polka tune to symbolise Blanche's **interior spaces**, and foreshadow her **descent into insanity**, which arises from her **delusional wish** to conceal her past.

- ❖ In the opening scene, the **foreshadowing** is apparent as the "**music of the polka rises**" once Stanley exposes Blanche's previous marriage. This tune is an aural illustration of her loss of her late husband Allan Gray.
- ❖ Yet, Williams transforms the play from Realist to Expressionist technique only at the beginning of Scene 7 as Blanche begins to lose her tenuous grasp on reality through the "**Varsouviana polka**", only diegetic for Blanche and symbolic of her inability to escape her past.
- ❖ Once Blanche grasps Stella's dishonesty, "**the distant piano goes into a hectic breakdown**" and this aural dissonance **implies** her psychological collapse.
- ❖ The dramatic irony in Blanche's whimsical presence in the bathroom - seen most clearly when she sings "**It's a Barnum and Bailey world, just as phony as it can be – But it**



wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me!" (Scene 7) contrasts with Stanley's outward aggression.

Williams powerfully illustrates her vulnerability as a physical contrast to Stanley's oral control. Th becomes a microcosm for her entrapment in the play, exacerbated by Mitch's uncharacteristic demand that she **"stop[s] the polka tune"** - subtly emphasising his role in her mental decline.

Blue Piano

In stark contrast to the Varsouviana, the Blue Piano is **reminiscent** of the **New South's fixation** on crude, overpowering desire. It symbolises the callous vitality of the Vieux Carre quarter of New Orleans. For instance, the blue piano is always played in scenes of great passion. This is symbolic of the **masculine power** exacerbated in the New America, and the **simultaneous decline** of Blanche's mental state.



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

Although this blue piano exists **inside the boundaries** of the exterior world, it is used to explore the ways that Blanche is **fundamentally incompatible** with the ways of the New South.

Light

Blanche's continuous efforts to conceal herself from the light stems from the **harsh reality** that the **light** represents: it symbolises the **triumph** of a **raw, unfiltered truth** that Blanche desires to escape from. Throughout the play, Blanche's denial and Stanley's embrace of light symbolises their **inescapable fate**, in that they **"had this date with each other from the beginning" (Scene 10)**

Blanche and the Absence of Light/Colour:

- Williams uses **colour symbolism** to introduce Blanche as a symbol of fragile and innocent femininity in Scene 1. Dressed in a **"white suit"** with **"earrings of pearl"** and **"white gloves"**, she is already outcast as **"incongruous to this setting"** Even her name, Blanche, **connotes** and is derived from the french word for "white", highlighting her Southern Belle grandeur.



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.

- Blanche’s **false innocence** is also **hinted at by her name**. The name means ‘white’ in French (alluding to her prestigious roots). However, in English the verb blanche means ‘to bleach by excluding light’ or ‘to become pale’. Thus, her name suggests various things about her character. It hints at her aversion to light, her delicate sensibility and mannerisms (one can blanche in horror) and the falseness of her pure facade. White is associated with innocence and yet her name suggests her whiteness is false; her past has been **bleached** or **scrubbed** away.
- “**Turn that over-light off! [...] I won’t be looked at in this merciless gaze!**” 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. Although she is haunted by these ghosts, it seems that for Blanche the shadows are familiar and therefore preferable.
- “**You’ve got to be soft and attractive. And I-I’m fading now!**” Blanche now understands how this world works; she realises that being ‘soft’ is essential to a woman’s beauty and acceptance in society. Blanche’s aging therefore becomes a **central aspect** of why she wants to hide away from light. She avoids speaking of her age and her fantasy to escape the strong light is because it will expose her and Mitch will see her for who she truly is. She feels that women cannot gain **acceptance** into society without their good looks.
- Additionally, once Mitch asks to see her true face in the light in Scene 9, she defends herself by claiming “**I like it dark. The dark is comforting to me**”. The comfort that she **derives** stems from the illusory mask she has put up to the world, hiding her true self.

Paper Lantern

A key motif within the light imagery is the paper lantern. The Chinese paper lantern that Blanche begs Mitch to place over the light bulb symbolises her attempts to disguise and gloss over her disreputable past. Here, it becomes a device to let her play the glorious role of the Southern Belle, soon to be torn down by the new society.

The reason she feels such a strong sense of attachment to the lantern is because it **weakens the harsh, naked light**. Williams exposes the inevitability of her mental disintegration through how easily the lantern can be torn off at any moment through the men’s actions - it will happen, sooner or later. Consequently, Mitch “**tears**” the lantern off, symbolizing the **destruction** of her **illusions**.



Contrast in Male vs Female Notion of Light

In Scene 3, Williams concentrates on Stanley's **overpowering antagonism** in the **masculine** space of 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".
- **Henry I. Schvey** elaborates that Williams transforms the raffish French Quarter into a world of '**primordial, jungle-like violence**' (2010) through colour symbolism.
- Williams paints a "**vivid**"ly coloured scene and takes care to emphasise this through the

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.**"

word's repetition. The brilliantly coloured Van Gogh painting, the men's "**coloured shirts, solid blues, a purple, a red-and-white check**" bind harsh colours to male aggression. The last object Williams sketches - the bright red watermelon - reminds the reader of the ease with which this scene can disintegrate into bloody violence.

The men's **preference for vivid colours** - think of Stanley in Scene 1, with his "**red-stained**" package of meat and blue overalls (both primary colours) - contrasts with Blanche's aversion to colour, mirroring her dislike of macho behaviour.



Realism vs Magic

As an **archetypal lost soul**, her fictitious “**Darling Shep**” façade in scene 5 accentuates her **psychological vulnerability** as she exclaims that “**What he wants is my companionship**”, exposing her longing for gratitude and depth in her relationships.

The reality which she tries to escape is the **brutish, masculine world of hegemonic which** traps and subordinates woman. Blanche **consciously** longs for illusion, revealed when she exclaims “**I don’t want realism**” in **Scene 9**.

Blanche has suffered enough **brutal realities of life** and her desire for magic ultimately stems from her **frustration**. But Williams undeniably exposes her delusion as the **savage, barbaric world of New Orleans** is far from her fairytale vision. A contemporary audience is permitted to see **Blanche’s agony and her longing for true acceptance**, which she never finds. Her **fatal flaw** is that she exists within the mistakes and boundaries of her past.

Stella’s Delusion

Stella is also trapped within her **delusion** of a healthy marriage. Unlike Blanche, she is **passive and subservient** to the roles of women in 1940’s America, and is therefore entirely unable to face the harsh reality of Stanley’s **toxic masculinity**.

The reason why she is happy to tolerate her husband’s abuse is open to interpretation.

1. One could argue that she is utterly in love (or lust) with Stanley, to the extent that she is unable to **discern** his brutish **dominance** from acts of **passion**.
 - ❖ For example, in the aftermath of Stanley’s abusive demonstration of power over her in Scene 3, Stella asserts to Blanche that “**I am not in anything I have a desire to get out of**” in Scene 4 and she is actually “**sort of thrilled by it.**”
 - ❖ Going further, Stella’s “**eyes and lips**” portray a “**narcotized tranquility**” signalling to the height of her love and Stanley’s psychological hold over her.
2. However, it is also possible that Stella’s **blind optimism** and total disregard for her rights stems from her understanding of her vulnerability as a woman; the only way for her to survive in this barbaric world is through her dependence on men for survival.
 - ❖ This is evident as Stella always excuses his behaviour, explaining that he “**always smashed things**” as “**when men are drinking and playing poker anything can happen**” (scene 4). The adverb “**always**” reveals the **permanency** of her situation.



image source: <https://cutt.ly/TzLuiB3>



- ❖ She is also **economically dependent** on him, as she explains that “**Stanley doesn’t give me a regular allowance**” and all she is given is a “**few dollars to smooth it over**” (Scene 4).
- ❖ She fully understands **her and her baby’s fate** without Stanley - they would not be able to survive on their own.
- ❖ Stella’s dangerous infatuation with Stanley threatens her relationship with Blanche after the climax of scene 10. Either **consciously or subconsciously**, she is unable as well as unwilling to admit the possibility of the rape, even more that her husband was the perpetrator. She continues to consider it a figment of Blanche’s already distraught psyche.
- ❖ Stella does not deny the rape on account of Stanley’s character; she denies it because had she believed it, she would have been forced to leave - possibly resulting in her and her baby’s **destitution**. This is revealed by her admission that she “**couldn’t believe her story and go on living with Stanley**” (Scene 11). Thus, it is societal forces - the **economic dependence of women on men**, which force her to delude herself, though the delusion wears thin.

Harsh Reality of Male Dominance

Blanche attempts to **cling onto her fantasy world** but the harsh reality of the **male dominated world** of 1940’s America bursts through. The hegemonic masculinity codes of the New South, primarily represented by Stanley’s brutish animality, serve as a reminder of the power dynamics at play. Therefore, Williams deliberately uses Stanley’s **alpha male exterior**, and develops it even further, to coin him as **one of the only unapologetically sexual characters**, projecting his sexuality freely in both his **interior (with Stella) and exterior spaces (with Blanche)**. Stanley represents a version of reality that brutally triumphs over the idea of an illusive facade that Blanche represents.

In these **male-dominated domains**, anxieties over **masculine power** and position are defined and expressed through **physical**, and often **sexualized, acts of violence**.

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 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 Moments

Stanley's Unapologetically Sexual Characterisation

The key scenes for his **hypersexuality**, which attracted **no repercussions** or judgement in society, include Scene 3 and Scene 8:

Scene 3:

Immediately as the women enter the **masculine space** of the Poker Night, the stage directions **accentuate** the night's "**lurid nocturnal brilliance**", which reveal the **primal forces** at play. These are brought to life as "**Stanley gives a loud whack of his hand on her (Stella's) thigh**", signalling that the **sexualised desire** drives their relationship. Here, **physical violence** is interlaced with sexual desire and **machismo exploitation**, showing Stanley's total disregard of her feelings. 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.

This is in stark contrast to Blanche's illusive fantasy of her Southern Belle privilege holding the same meaning in the New South.

Scene 8:

- Stanley exclaims to Stella that "**It's gonna be sweet when we can make noise in the night the way we used to and get the coloured lights going**". The **colour symbolism** and **allusions** to sex ("**getting the coloured lights going**") are used to show both Stanley's **physical and verbal power** over Stella, but also that he only desires her for his pleasures.

Even without direct association with primary colours by costume, Stanley's speech reinforces a visual connection between his person and these intense colours. His repeated references to getting "**the coloured lights going**" has **sexual undertones**, reinforced by his term "**red-letter night**" about the evening of the traumatic rape scene.

- Williams further explores these grave **inequalities** in power through **disabling** female agency in a society polluted by alpha males. Stanley's false characterisation of Mitch as a victim who is "**caught**" by Blanche constructs a false sense of entrapment compared to Stella and Blanche's very real entrapment. From a **feminist lens**, the masculine fixation on female chastity and virginity reveals the height of the repercussions if men discover any deviation from accepted and expected norms of female sexuality.



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