



# Edexcel English Literature A-level

## A Streetcar Named Desire: Themes Hegemonic Masculinity

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## Introduction

**Hegemonic masculinity**, a concept which is part of **Connell's (1995) gender order theory**, can be defined as a practice that **authorises** and **encourages male domination**, therefore justifying the **subordination** of **women** and **non-hegemonic** males.

The theme of hegemonic masculinity is central to both Williams' play, but also to the wider **social and cultural contexts** of post-war New Orleans.

While **hegemonic masculinity** is the most obvious form of masculinity presented in the play, through Stanley and Steve, the presentation of **masculinity** is **not monolithic**; there are also non-hegemonic masculinities on display or hinted at, through the Blanche's **gay** late husband Allan and the comparatively **effeminate** Mitch. Despite Mitch's **beta-male** status, he enforces norms of sexual purity, showing that it is not only **alpha** males who reproduce **misogynistic ideologies** which oppress woman. Allan commits suicide after being **walked in on** by Blanche, who then expresses her **disgust** for him. Allan can be seen as a **victim of heteronormativity**.

Through *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams explores a **moral problem** concerning the extent to which societies **polluted** by **patriarchal ideals**, bestow **power** upon the **privileged** (men like Stanley Kowalski) and allow them to **exploit the vulnerable** (women like Blanche DuBois and Stella Kowalski). Williams' portrayal of the vulnerable Blanche as a **symbolic foil** to the brutish Stanley, and specifically her **tragic deterioration**, acts as a **social commentary** on the treatment of **women** who **owned their sexuality** and rebelled against the **patriarchal social norms** of the time.

## Literary Criticism: A05

In her book *Masculinities*, Connell explores four types of masculinity:

1. **Hegemonic Masculinity:** the dominant form of masculinity, as explained above. Usually characterised by a heterosexual, middle class and physically strong white man. Stanley Kowalski displays many characteristics of hegemonic masculinity.
2. **Complicit Masculinity:** Refers to a man who admires or does not challenge hegemonic masculinity, even if he doesn't fit within the category. Stanley's poker friends fit this category when they condone his violence, speaking "**quietly and lovingly to him**" after he has just hit his wife (scene three)
3. **Marginalised Masculinity:** Masculinity that is 'unable to conform to or derive benefits from hegemonic masculinity', for example being non-white
4. **Subordinate Masculinity:** Where a person's qualities are lacking or the polar opposite of that of hegemonic masculinity. For instance, it may involve acting effeminately, not being heterosexual or being 'too' emotional. Many have argued that **Blanche's late husband** is an example of this.



## Relevant Social and Historical Contexts

### Masculinity and the New South

The **cultural clash** between Blanche and Stanley is wholly **symbolic** of the **ostentatious** values of the **Old, aristocratic South** versus the **societal evolution** that saw the awakening of the industrial **working-class New South**. In the New South, immigration, and especially, **masculinity** became key **drivers** of the **American social landscape**.

**Masculinity** is socially constructed and thus must be contextualised to period and place.

Andrew Rotundo has traced the history of masculinity in the US in his book *American Manhood*. He argues that in the 18th century, masculinity was 'communal'. However, the rise of the market economy and of the republican government in the late 19th century saw a shift to **self-made manhood**, a masculinity based on the ability of a man to **make something of himself** and to **support his family**. This idea lingered into the 20th century and was then replaced by a '**passionate manhood**': the expression of the self, either in the workplace or through hobbies, is paramount. The **ideology**



of passionate manhood evolved as a result of WWII. Men had gone off to fight and had returned to a **prospering economy**. These veterans were **not so concerned with proving their manhood** after facing death in WWII; they were **more concerned with living in the way they desired**. This idea of a man **pursuing his passions and pleasures** was the dominant idea of American masculinity immediately following WWII. In this context of passionate manliness Williams creates Stanley Kowalski.

Williams' focus on Stanley's pleasure and enjoyment is clear in the **stage directions**. Williams writes:

**"Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women...branching out from this complete and satisfying center are all the auxiliary channels of his life, such as his heartiness with men, his appreciation of rough humor, his love of good drink and food and games, his car, his radio, everything that is his, that bears his emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer."**



Stanley's **pleasure is prioritised over Stella and Blanche's comfort**. In the poker scene, he shows no regard for their wellbeing, asking them to **"go upstairs and sit with Eunice"** (Scene 3) and ignoring the fact that it is 02:30 and the noise is stopping them from sleeping. Stanley is the **embodiment of passionate manhood**; nevertheless he also displays elements of **self-made masculinity**; he emphasises his role as a **breadwinner** when he ostentatiously throws a bloody package of meat at his wife in the opening scene.

The play is set in the **late 1940s**. In the 1950s, the dominant masculine ideal would evolve from that of the passionate man to that of the **father figure**. This was the era when the image of the white, middle-class American family would gain prominence. Men were expected to commute to the city while providing for their families in the suburbs. Thus, by this time **"The suburbs became a central fact of postwar America and the new arena for proving one's manhood"** (Kimmel). Men were **providers, protectors and possessors**. The heavy load of expectations provoked in men **fear and anxiety**, and any perceived threats to one's masculinity often resulted in **defensiveness and aggression**. We see this in the tension between Blanche and Stanley. Blanche questions Stanley's intelligence and humanity and her mockery of him eventually leads to her rape. Likewise, when Stella calls Stanley an **"animal"** in Scene Three, he hits her. In his **propensity for violence** when his masculinity or ego is threatened, and in his **valuation of his own pleasures and desires**, Stanley can be seen as a figure that represents **masculinity in transition**.

## Initial Performance Context

The play was first performed in **1974**, when a **feminist consciousness** was emerging. To a contemporary audience sympathetic to emergent ideas around male domination and gender equality, Stanley's **brutish mannerisms** and **violent behaviour** would be **scarring**, shameful and condemned.

- ❖ At the time, **Stanley** in many ways **symbolised** the world of **masculinity** and **fierce individualism**.

## Feminine Codes of Conduct

To truly comprehend the **overarching dominance** of the **hegemonic male** characters, we must see the **rigid gender norms** of the South. Williams introduces the **social and sexual hypocrisy** of **post-war America** when Stanley alludes to the **'Napoleonic Code'**



For context, the Napoleonic Code was a **legal code** acknowledged in New Orleans from **French colonial rule** that gave a husband **authority** over his **wife's assets**. Although Stanley does not have control over his wife's assets, he seems interested in gaining control over them. Stella is **economically dependent** on Stanley and since she can see no way of living without him. This is hinted at when she justifies choosing to ignore Blanche's rape accusation: "**I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley**" (Scene 11). Essentially, Stella is presented with two options: believe Blanche and feel forced to leave Stanley, or disbelieve her and continue living with him. The first does not seem like a **viable option**; thus she feels she has **no choice** but to pretend that Stella is mistaken.

In addition to women's economic dependence, women were also expected to stay **chaste**. Blanche does not conform to expectations of chastity. Thus Stella and Blanche are both ultimately **constrained**: condemned and trapped.

## The Treatment of Blanche: Sexual Hypocrisy

Blanche's portrayal of herself as a **chaste and delicately civilised schoolteacher** is at odds with her , her provocative dress habits (red silks, satin and costume jewellery) and her attempts at seducing a "Young Man" - flirting with him and kissing him. Blanche has a "**masculine energy**" in seducing the Young Man, which an **audience** of the 1940s may have found **irrational and disturbing**. While Blanche is ashamed of her past - which manifests in her compulsive washing as well as her aversion to light - she also attempts to **regain** her sexuality. However, she is constantly **condemned** for it, and ultimately rejected by Mitchell for her sexual history. In contrast, Stanley's unapologetic sexual prowess is **encouraged** "**richly feathered male bird amongst hens**" (Scene 1). Thus, sexuality is one of the ways that gender inequality is exposed.

## Stella's Subservience

When **Stanley** physically **abuses** a pregnant **Stella**, Williams exposes the extent of his **toxicity** and **manipulation**. Even then, **she** is **unable** to **differentiate** his **abuse** from his so-called "**nature**". Here, she excuses all of his wrongdoings and views them through an **essentialist lens**, whereby that **brutish physicality** is expected of him as an alpha male.

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**

### Critics: A05

Stella's **subservience** is further illustrated by critic **Susan Koprince's** view that:

"[Stella] is essentially a **submissive, self-deprecating wife** who tolerates and **excuses** her husband's behaviour"



the dark” and therefore, she uses his sexual desires as an excuse to “**make everything else seem unimportant**” (Scene 4).

**Stanley's psychological hold** over ultimately results in **subservience** and **entrapment**, to the extent that she cannot even recognise it, or bear to leave him, even though this ultimately is at the cost of Blanche's sanity (“**I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley**”, Scene 11).

According to [Panda](#), the “**Stanley-Stella relationship is one of the supreme examples of hierarchization of activity/passivity opposition**” Stanley's activeness instantly pacifies Stella and puts her in an insubordinate role, thus highlighting the patriarchal ideology of the play. Stella **excuses** and **naturalises** Stanley's behaviour through a gendered framework. She is also both his complement and is polar opposite.

## Stanley Kowalski and the New American Man

Sexually volatile, animalistic physicality and ‘**gaudy**’ masculinity infiltrates *A Streetcar Named Desire*, leading to the tragic disintegration of Blanche and her ‘**moth**’-like femininity.

Sexual dominion and violence were the key characteristics of the ideal New American Man.

**Stanley** becomes the **embodiment** of the **archetypal machismo** and **capitalist greed** which permeates this **post-war landscape**.

- He is an **emblem** of the **new America**, in which one (granted that he is a white, or white-aligned, man) can become whatever he wants to be regardless of background.

## Grade Booster: A05

The **male gaze**, a phrase coined from **Laura Mulvey's** 1973 paper *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, is the perpetual act of **illustrating women**, in literature and the visual arts, from a heterosexual and **masculine space**.

This **derogatory** treatment of women sees them as **sexual objects** for the **pleasure** of the heterosexual **male viewer**.

In this manner, **Stanley's** horrific treatment of both **Blanche and Stella** at numerous points during the play signal to the severity of his **sexual dominion** in **society**.







While Williams constructs Stanley's base and animalistic mannerisms as a physical representation of the New American man, he exposes Stanley's **masculine power** as rooted in two key aspects of his privilege:

1. His unapologetically sexual **male gaze**
2. His physicality through being the archetypal '**Alpha Male**'

## Stanley's Sexual Dominion: the Unapologetic Male Gaze

Stanley's **alpha male persona** accords with the fact that he is of the **only unapologetically sexual characters**, projecting his sexuality freely in both his **interior** (with Stella) and **exterior spaces** (with Blanche).

- Although he **abuses Stella** earlier in the play, she ultimately continues to stay with him and **surrenders** to his force and manipulation.
- While Stella is at the hospital giving birth to his child, Stanley rapes Blanche: the culmination of his sexual act with Stella coincides with the tragic culmination of his destined "**date**" with Blanche.

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

Key Scenes Depicting Stanley's Sexual Domination (following page)





Scene 3	Scene 7	Scene 8
<p>[Stage Directions] The men are at <b>“the peak of their manhood, as coarse and direct and powerful as primary colours”</b>. For these men, this game, in which <b>“competition, aggressiveness, and finally domination are the rules,”</b> is the primary method of asserting their masculinity and proof of their <b>machismo</b>. The presence of other men as well as Stanley’s drunkenness creates a threatening atmosphere.</p>	<p>Blanche is being attacked by Stanley’s manipulation, and cruel enigmatic and <b>euphemistic revelation</b> of his knowledge of her sexual past.</p> <p><b>“I’d have that on my conscience for the rest of my life if I knew all that stuff and let my best friend get caught!”</b></p> <p>Stanley’s hypocrisy and false <b>victimisation</b> of Mitch being <b>‘caught’</b> exposes the extent of the repercussions for women if men discover they have deviated from accepted norms of female sexuality.</p>	<p><b>“Stanley [...] spear(s) his fork into the remaining chop which he eats with his fingers”</b></p> <p>Williams deliberately includes a deeply primal and animalistic image before brutish rape, connecting his animality with his sexuality.</p>
<p>Immediately as the women enter in Scene 3, the stage directions indicate that <b>“Stanley gives a loud whack of his hand on her thigh”</b>. proleptically underlining the notion that the sexualised <b>male gaze</b> drives their relationship.</p> <p>Here, physical violence is interlaced with sexual desire and machismo exploitation. From the harsh onomatopoeic verb <b>“whack”</b> to the pornification of her <b>“thigh”</b>, Williams gives us an insight into the</p>	<p>As Stanley explains to Stella that Blanche realised <b>“the jig was all up!”</b> when the superintendent found out, it conveys Stanley’s complete lack of compassion towards her, giving us an insight into his own <b>superficial understanding</b> of sexual relations. Such relations are only deemed significant to him if men serve the dominant and superior position.</p> <p>The <b>proleptic irony</b> is evident here as we later find out in scene 9 that for Blanche, it was much more</p>	<p><b>“[he hurls a plate to the floor] [...] [he seizes her arm]”</b></p> <p>Stanley’s abusive, physical response to Stella telling him to <b>“go wash up and [...] clear the table”</b> after calling him <b>“disgustingly greasy”</b> illustrates his controlling nature - he cannot stand being told what to do by women.</p> <p>This further highlights his <b>disparaging attitude</b> towards women - if they do not please him, they do not deserve verbal or physical respect.</p>







<p><b>objectification</b> of women in 1940's America.</p>	<p>psychological, to <b>"fill (her) empty heart"</b> after the death of her husband.</p>	
<p><b>"They come together with low animal moans"</b> their relationship exists predominantly on a deeply primal level. Stanley sees relationships based on carnal lust.</p>	<p>If men discover any deviation from accepted norms of virginity and chastity, their reactions are extreme.</p> <p>By rejecting Blanche and claiming that she is not the ideal woman he naively thought she was, Mitch and Stanley draw attention to the discrepancy between how women really behaved and the type of behaviour that is expected of them</p>	<p><b>"Remember what Huey Long said - Every man is a King! And I am the King around here!"</b></p> <p>Stanley's forceful attempts to regain control are illustrative of his superficial and <b>fragile masculinity</b>.</p> <p>Huey Long was perceived as a tyrant who abused his position of power using intimidation and aggression.</p>
<p>Stanley's propensity for violence is encouraged by his intoxication. There is almost a primal, <b>'sub-human'</b> and animalistic sense of masculinity to him, as he bellows <b>'STELL-LAHHHHH!'</b>. This yell connotes mating call and is cohesive with the initial description of him as a <b>'richly feathered male bird among hens'</b>.</p>	<p><b>"Sister Blanche is no lily"</b></p> <p><b>"Dame Blanche"</b>. Stanley ironically calls Blanche "Sister Blanche". She literally is Stella's sister, but a title would also be given to a nun. Stanley therefore plays with her name in an <b>ironic reference</b> to her sexual past; Blanche is no nun. He also plays on the association between purity and the colour white.</p> <p>Despite what her name suggests ('blanche' / 'blanc' is French for white) Blanche is not morally pure, thus she is <b>"no lily"</b>. <b>"Dame Blanche"</b> may also be a reference to her affected air.</p>	<p><b>"It's gonna be sweet when we can make noise in the night the way we used to and get the coloured lights going"</b> Here Stanley <b>euphemistically</b> refers to sex. Stanley is often associated with lurid colours - the poker night, the opening scene - and it seems he prefers lurid colours during sex, too. The connection between coloured lights and sex, and lurid colours and Stanley links Stanley's character to sex. Red is also linked to sex later in the play, when Stanley calls what will be the night of the rape a <b>"red-letter night"</b>.</p>





	<p>Stanley's repeated reference to Blanche's sexual history reveal the extent of society's <b>preoccupation with female sexual purity</b>, and the way that <b>women's sexual history could be used as a weapon</b> against them.</p>	
<p>Stanley constantly tries to <b>undermine female agency</b> as it represents a threat to his <b>masculinity</b>. Stella and Blanche are laughing during the poker night annoys Stanley as their enjoyment of a conversation that doesn't involve him <b>marginalises</b> him - someone who believes he is <b>"King"</b> (Scene 8). He responds to their laughter with a <b>command</b>: <b>"You hens cut out that conversation in here"</b>.</p> <p>However, Stella fights back and says <b>"This is my house and I will talk as much as I want to!"</b></p> <p>The word <b>"hens"</b> recalls the stage directions which describe Stanley as a <b>"richly feathered male bird among hens"</b>, reminding the reader of the text of his difference.</p>		<p><b>"[He crosses off his bedroom, ripping off his shirt, and changes into a brilliant silk bowling shirt]"</b></p> <p>The casual violence of this gesture <b>"ripping"</b> foreshadows the violence he will do to Blanche in Scene 10.</p>





## Other Key Moments/Scenes that Reveal Stanley's Sexual Dominance

### Scene 10: The Rape Scene

Stanley's **sexuality** and **virility** are **interconnected**. This is clear whenever his **machismo** is **challenged** by those who are his **social inferiors** (Stella and Blanche); his **response** is sexual abuse and **violence**. Many argue that Stanley's unforgivable violence towards Blanche because **threat** to his **masculinity**.

**Stanley** emerges **victorious** as he acts according to the **expected behavioural norms for males**. Contrastingly, Blanche is **ostracised** and abused as she continually fails to resign herself to **subordination** on the basis of her gender.

- ❑ The **surreal** theatricality of the rape scene, as illustrated by the **Expressionist** “**lurid reflections**” and the phrase “**red-letter night**”, **foreshadows** Blanche's trauma.
- ❑ Williams signals the imminent rape through **symbolism** Blanche's fragile in her now “**crumpled white satin gown**” as opposed to Stanley's **macho** and imposing “**brilliant silk pyjamas**”.
- ❑ Williams creates a **primordial, jungle-like feel** to the scene through stage directions; the “**night is filled with inhuman voices like cries in a jungle flame**”. Stanley's animalistic nature is matched by the surroundings. Blanche's “**Darling Shep**” **fantasy** is gradually **destroyed**, and she **loses** his world for what it is.
- ❑ He corners her in the bedroom, refusing to move out of her way **“springs”** at her, shouting “**Tiger - tiger!**” as he captures her. Blanche's silent resignation as Stanley carries her “**inert figure**” to the bed indicates her ultimate mental and physical **disintegration**. Stanley seems to **mock and confirm Blanche's accusations** that he is an animal through his exclamation.

### Scene 11: The Tragic Ending

One of the play's most disturbing moments of the play occurs **Scene 11**. Williams deliberately uses **repetition** to highlight the **destructiveness** of masculinity. The atmosphere is “**raw**” and “**lurid**”, recalling the “**lurid nocturnal brilliance**” of Scene Three, which **proleptically** warns us of the play's **tragic denouement**.

- After Blanche is misunderstood and taken away, Stella finds herself trapped in her husband's manipulation. Stella is crying about Blanche, and Stanley, in an attempt to comfort her - or, perhaps, finding an opportunity to take advantage of her - lets his “**fingers find the opening of her blouse**”.
- His misogynistic act serves as a **commentary** on his lack of respect for Stella's personal existence.
- Stella's **sexual objectification** and Stanley's sexual **male gaze** is all that remains.



## 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 attracted to him. As explained in detail below, Stanley's alpha male tendencies are demonstrated through his **domineering, violent outbursts** and his power over Stella.

### Performance Interpretation: A05

#### The Young Vic Production in 2013

**Ben Foster**, the actor playing **Stanley** Kowalski, plays up Stanley's **alpha male** persona [\[Source\]](#).

- In the words of theatre critic **Jeffrey Walker**, '**Foster balances the devoted male animal with sheer brute force.**'
- **Susannah Clapp** similarly interprets Foster as a '**tattooed bruiser who roars like a goaded bull.**'

## Key Scenes Which Demonstrate Stanley's Alpha-Male Masculinity

Scene 1	Scene 3	Scene 7
Williams intentionally crafts our first impression of Stanley in Act One as audacious, vivid and unapologetically sexual. He is <b>"roughly dressed"</b> in <b>"blue denim work clothes"</b> and <b>"heaves"</b> a package of meat towards his wife. He knows and likes to be in control.	The <b>"Van Gogh"</b> painting, with its typically lurid colours, <b>complements</b> the <b>"sort of lurid nocturnal brilliance"</b> of the poker night scene. Williams details the scene's saturated colours: <b>"vivid green [...] solid blues, a purple, a red-and-white check, a light green"</b> , as well as the <b>"vivid"</b> green and red of a watermelon. These rich colours illustrate the men's animal natures; acting as a <b>proleptic irony</b> for Stanley's behaviour at the end of the scene.	Stanley describes Blanche as trying to <b>"squirm out"</b> of a situation in which she was found to be involved with one of her students. She was unable to because they <b>"had her on the hook good"</b> . The <b>animalistic imagery</b> debase her actions and place her in a position of vulnerability and shame.





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 package of meat he bears emphasises his role as breadwinner - or someone who **literally ‘brings home the bacon’**.

Stanley demonstrates that he makes the rules as he **“tosses some watermelon rinds to the floor”**, without any regard for the fact that Stella lives in the house, too.

He then yells with **“with heaven-splitting violence STELL-AHHHHH!”**, demonstrating his animal tendencies.

When Blanche alludes to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* by verbal scene-painting (**pragmatographia**) in saying **“Possess your soul in patience!”** to Stanley, her fascination with the world of fantasy and ornamentation is evident. However, Stanley feels his masculinity threatened and immediately resorts to verbal arrogance **“It’s not my soul I’m worried about”**, cynically cutting down her theatricality. This exchange is also an example of the play’s conflict between **realism and expressionism**.

Stanley’s entrance into the house is one of violence and aggression, as he **“throws the screen door of the kitchen open”**. Williams describes this casually, as it comes from the **“animal joy of his being”**. The epicentre of his life consists of **“his heartiness with men”**, his **“rough humour”** and **“pleasure with women”**. From this description we see that Stanley socialises with men, and his relations with women are solely sexual.

The setting of the artificially vivid kitchen (**“electric bulb” “raw colours”**) not only alludes to Blanche’s façade of innocence but also introduces a sinister and hellish ambience.

**“Hey, canary bird! Toots! Get OUT of the BATHROOM!”**

Here, Stanley asserts his verbal dominance over a vulnerable Blanche, completely **degrading her** through the **dehumanising** reference to a bird. The bathroom is the only space where Blanche can engage in fantasy, and thus her own space of freedom. His vicious language cruelly disfigures her happiness.

In the **Elia Kazan film adaptation**, however, Stanley’s character is seen saying this less aggressively.





		<p>Scene 7 “<b>Lie Number One</b>” “<b>Lie Number Two</b>” Stanley’s patronising and hyperbolic tone to pinpoint all of Blanche’s alleged failures or lies is another trait of the toxic alpha male archetype - he must defeat those <b>subordinate</b> to him..</p>
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### Literary Criticism: A05

Williams fixates on Stanley’s **overpowering antagonism** in the **masculine space** of the “Poker Night” in Scene 3. 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 draws parallels between the flamboyance of the Van Gogh painting (an **Expressionist** technique), to the men’s “**coloured shirts, solid blues, a purple, a red-and-white check**”







## Alpha Male Masculinity and Hegemonic Masculinity

While Stanley is undoubtedly an **alpha male**, he does not conform to hegemonic masculinity as defined by Connell (1995). Hegemonic masculinity, according to Connell, is synonymous with power: those who conform are usually **heterosexual, white and middle-class**. Stanley is only the former; while modern audiences may view Stanley as white, whiteness in 1940s America was more **exclusionary**. Irish, Eastern European and Southern European immigrants to America were often discriminated against and denied housing, and moreover viewed as 'other' or 'not-quite-white'. This means Stanley **would have been denied many of the privileges** granted to 'real' American men, and has led Gloria McMillan to - perhaps controversially - label Stanley the play's '**Polish African American**'. We see a hint of this prejudice through Blanche othering Stanley '**You healthy Polack**' (Scene 8). She doubtfully asks if his friends are '**Polacks?**' (Scene 1). She also expresses disbelief that Stella is sleeping with Stanley when she exclaims '**In bed with your--Polack!**' (Scene 1). This pause perhaps also signals the extent of her disgust; she does not want to admit that her sister is with a man of Polish origin, and therefore pauses before **forcing the word out**. Despite Stanley asserting that he is '**one hundred percent American**' (Scene 8), he would have been **othered and snubbed** by many, and thus does not hold the same power in the world that he wields in his household.

Stanley does not fit another of the typical criteria for hegemonic masculinity: he is not middle class. Stanley is squarely a **blue-collar worker**, signalled immediately and unmistakably by his "**blue denim**" and bloody package of meat (Scene 1). Denim was the workwear of choice for manual labourers; due to its sturdy qualities the prospectors of the California Gold Rush wore denim. The meat also indicates that Stanley is working class; it is **roughly wrapped and soaked with blood** - lacking the delicate presentation of meat wrapped by butchers catering to the middle class. Stanley takes pride in working-class hobbies and pleasures: poker, bowling, "**rough humour**", "**drink and food and games**" (Scene 1). Nevertheless, he would have also been aware that he belongs to a **subordinate class** - one that is exploited and pathologised by the middle and upper classes. Furthermore, he does not fit the emerging **ideal man**: the **breadwinner father figure**, with his white-collar job in the city and his children, wife and domestic appliances behind his white-picket, suburban fence.

Stanley takes pride in his brutish masculinity, but we can see his **verbal and physical dominance** as perhaps a reaction to the knowledge that he is **othered** and **subordinate** in the social hierarchy. When he is reminded of his other, working-class status (e.g. derogatorily by Blanche), he **lashes out**. Thus, his alpha male persona is perhaps a way of **compensating** for the fact that he does not possess hegemonic masculinity. By demonstrating his power in the domestic space, Stanley can **bridge the gap** between what he believes he should be - "**King**" (Scene 8) - and how he is seen by the outside world.



## Non-Hegemonic or Subordinate Masculinity

### Allan Gray

Those who do not display alpha masculinity or conform to hegemonic masculinity are, to a greater or lesser degree, ignored and even **marginalised** or **ostracised**. This is the case with Blanche's late husband, Allan Gray, who is gay and dies via suicide before the play begins.

Allan is a **symbol of Blanche's traumatised past**. Many psychologists and psychiatrists in 1940s America, including the **American Psychiatric Association**, considered homosexuality a mental illness or even a sociopathic personality disturbance. These horrific attitudes towards homosexuality are well presented in Williams' play: Stella initially describes Allan as a **"beautiful and talented young man"**. He then suddenly becomes a **"degenerate"** - a reference to his sexuality. The latter descriptor reveals that homosexuality was viewed as an **unnatural aberration** and a **perversion of morality**.

Allan kills himself after being found with another man by Blanche, who tells him that he **"disgust[s]"** her (Scene 6). This brutal rejection of somebody he had loved, possibly his own **internalised homophobia** and fear of being exposed, become too much to bear, and he shoots himself. In essence, Allan is a victim of **hegemonic masculinity**, which is based on machismo and heterosexism. Allan's **difference** from the other male characters is signalled by his name - Gray - which contrasts with Stanley and his posse's lurid colours. It also signals his need to **camouflage** himself in order to survive, and therefore the half-life that he is condemned to live.

Williams, like Allan, was gay. His position as a gay man - and therefore somebody who embodied **subordinate masculinity** - allowed him to **critique** hegemonic / alpha masculinity from the sidelines, seeing and identifying with its many **casualties**.

Allan and Blanche are **both victims of hegemonic masculinity**, and Williams this plays by linking them to each other through language and symbols. 'Blanche' is French for white, and an English verb for bleaching through lack of exposure to sunlight. It is thus a shadowy tone, allied with grey. Neither white nor grey are true colours. Thus, they are **allied** with each other - and contrasted with Stanley, who is associated with lurid or primary colours. Blanche is also linked to Allan through Mitch, who rejects her for her sexual history in the same way that Blanche rejects Allan for his sexuality. Mitch tells her he was **"fool enough to believe [she] was straight"** (Scene 9). The last word recalls Allan's sexuality and Blanche's revelation that she has found it out.

Through Allan and Blanche's fates, Williams exposes the way that those who do not embody hegemonic or complicity masculinity are ostracised and **die both literal and psychological and social/ symbolic deaths**.





## Harold “Mitch” Mitchell

Stanley is presented as the alpha male, while **Mitch** is portrayed as a **beta male**. As **Marie Lund** explains in her article ‘*Harold (Mitch) Mitchell’s role in the demise of Blanche Dubois in A Streetcar Named Desire*’, Williams presents Mitch as an **“unusual antithesis to the prevalent depiction of a man”**. Here, she explains that Mitch is still a strong masculine character, but lesser in comparison to Stanley, due to his relatively **effeminate** nature:

- ❖ Mitch’s complexity and vulnerability is what Stanley uses to dominate him. He is clearly **more sensitive** than others, 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”** (Scene 3).
- ❖ 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** of this society to treat a woman with respect, rather than to sexually objectify her as Stanley does (to both Stella and Blanche, as explored earlier), is seen as **“awkward”** and unconventional. **Mitch is unable to conform to the alpha male tendencies** that Stanley carelessly does.
- ❖ Mitch encompasses an almost **boyish fragility**, which is arguably what Blanche finds so endearing. This is evident in her interpretation that Mitch is, in fact, **“superior to the others”**
- ❖ Mitch remains one of the only ones who is truly moved and **internally destroyed** by Blanche’s treatment, screaming **“I’ll kill you! [He lunges and strikes at Stanley]”** to which Stanley recklessly replies **“Hold this bone-headed cry-baby!”** (Scene 11). Here, Mitch uses verbal and physical violence, **mirroring Stanley’s alpha male tendencies**. However, he does it out of **grief and respect for Blanche** - while Stanley does the polar opposite.

Mitch is allied with Allan; Allan is described as possessing a **“softness and tenderness which wasn’t like a man’s”** although is he not overly **“effeminate looking”** (Scene 6). Likewise, Mitch is sincere, sensitive and gentle. Nevertheless, his sensitive, gentlemanly nature is a facade which gives Blanche a **false sense of security**. Mitchell may be kinder than Stanley but he still **buys into ideas about gender difference** and enforces **ideals of female sexual purity**.

His prejudice is hinted at in Scene 3 when he states that **“Poker shouldn’t be played in a house with women.”** While this statement might stem from a desire to protect Blanche and Stella from drunkenness and violence, it reproduces the idea of **separate spheres** - there are certain activities and spaces women should be excluded from. Mitch’s misogyny and prejudice comes to the fore in Scene 9 when he destroys **Blanche’s self-worth** after discovering that she is not the **emblem of purity** he desires. His misogynistic claim that **“you’re not clean enough to bring in a house with my mother”** (Scene 9) helps to dismantle her psyche. He also accuses Blanche **“lapping [up liquor] all summer like a wild cat!”** (Scene 9). This animalistic and dehumanising portrayal of Blanche reveals his lack of sympathy for her. His ultimate rejection of her reveals **how widespread the male fixation on female chastity is**. His reproduction of ideas about gender difference and female sexual purity reveals him as belonging to the category of **complicit masculinity**. He does not question Stanley’s **alpha male behaviour** during the





poker scene but simply states that women should not be present. Likewise, he does not challenge ideas around female sexual purity but instead **reproduces them**, and is therefore **complicit in Blanche's downfall**.

