

Edexcel English Literature A-level

A Streetcar Named Desire: Character Profiles
Stella Kowalski

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Stella Kowalski

THE WOMAN IN THE MIDDLE

INTRODUCTION

Stella Kowalski is the younger **sister** of Blanche Dubois and the **wife** of Stanley Kowalski. As Blanche puts it, Stella, who was **young, left Laurel** and the family plantation as she was **seduced** by the **New American** life in New Orleans and Stanley...leaving Blanche to deal with the deteriorating Belle Reve. She is very much in love with her “common” Stanley Kowalski who she has a very strong **sexual** relationship despite the occasions of physical and verbal **abuse**. Her **aristocratic descent** is apparent in her **disposition** and manners, particularly juxtaposed to her neighbours.



Stella with Stanley in the 1951 film adaptation.

Image source:

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-streetcar-timeline-20170512-htmlstory.html>

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- **Aristocratic**

Stella Kowalski, like Blanche, has the **disposition** of aristocracy as they were both **educated** and raised on a plantation in the **Old South**. Her descent is only an issue when Blanche comes into the Kowalski's lives, bringing with her **prejudice** against his working-class **habitus**. Stanley feels **threatened** in a household with an aristocratic majority particularly when he hears **Blanche's words from Stella's mouth**.



Image source:
<https://pixy.org/4757520/>

- **Gentle, impressionable and passive homemaker**

Stella is **empathetic** and **forgiving** in nature.

She is easily **manipulated** by both Blanche and Stanley, as she **loves** them both dearly. She is **tolerant** of both their extreme behaviours and is so **passive** that she can reflect the **audience's position** of helplessness in the play.

As a homemaker, from a **feminist lens**, Stella reflects the **1940's subjugated and dependant woman**, she returns to Stanley despite his abuse, writing it off as “passion”, and at the end, we see her choosing to **reject** the rape of Blanche so that she can continue to live with him. **“I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley”** clearly shows that



Stella believes that there is a possibility that the rape happened, and she knows Stanley better than others.

- **Realistic and practical**

“**That’s much more practical**”, Stella responds when Eunice chooses to drink rather than call the police after an episode of physical abuse in her household. As women were dependent on men in the 1940’s, they were forced to tolerate abuse and it was the **man’s way or the highway**. Stella disbelieving that Stanley raped Blanche, is also an act of “**practicality**” as she knows that she and her baby cannot live with him if she believes Blanche.

Assessment Objectives

AO4 and AO5:

In “Domestic Violence in A Streetcar Named Desire”, Author Susan Koprince, discourses Stella’s subservience as typical battered housewife behaviour, in a time where “wife-beating” was observed as a private family issue. Stella makes excuses and pardons his behaviour, accepting the love and sex he showers her with after a violent episode.

MAIN RELATIONSHIPS

Stanley

Stella is the **subservient** wife of Stanley. Stella married Stanley despite him being from a lower class than her, and has a strong relationship with him that is **driven by sex**. Stanley frequently uses sex to manipulate Stella.

While Stanley is physically and verbally abusive towards Stella, she forgives him as he is just as **passionate** about his apologies as he is about his anger. Stella also informs Blanche that she is “**thrilled**” by Stanley’s violent actions “**He smashed all the light bulbs with the heel of my slipper!... I was--sort of--thrilled by it.**” While we know any violence towards her person is **unwelcomed** by Stella, the aforementioned comment can be understood as **Stella’s denial** of abuse manifesting in her **acceptance** of his generally violent behaviour.

Towards the end of the play, Stella gives **birth** to Stanley’s child, and this also **ties** her to him. While Stella can be characterised as more **realistic** than Blanche in her outlook on life, this is **contested** at the end of the play as she chooses to believe that the rape is a figment of Blanche’s imagination and remains with Stanley.



“It's sort of messed up right now but when it's clean it's really sweet” are Eunice's words about their marriage, after an episode of physical abuse. We see that despite his abuse and brutish disposition, in his primal way, Stanley loves and is **possessive** about Stella. Stella in turn does **defend him** frequently to Blanche, despite agreeing with her. While Stella is not a protagonist, her hamartia is Stanley. She has his same passion for **sex** and is **honest** and **down to earth** about her life, unlike Blanche.

Blanche

Stella **loves** Blanche dearly and is very **empathetic** towards her plight. Stella is very **impressionable** when it comes to Blanche, she **trusts** her and looks out for her. She **defends** Blanche constantly to Stanley's verbal assaults but **fails** to save her sister from his malicious plan at the end. As Blanche says, Stella is all Blanche has left in the world, having suffered loss after loss, but in the end, Stella **chooses Stanley** over Blanche in an attempt to be practical.

Eunice

Eunice is Stella's **upstairs neighbour** and **friend**. Additionally, she is Kowalski's **landlady** as well. Eunice is a **parallel embodiment** of the working-class life Stella has chosen. She too is in an abusive relationship but as she states at the end “**Life has got to go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going.**”.

She **shelters** Stella from Stanley when the incident of physical abuse occurs and tells Stella to never believe the rape occurred and content with her life. It is also important to note that Eunice **beats Steve back** when they are engaged in physical abuse before she storms off to drink. Eunice, who is **older**, could represent the future **sister-figure** and **emotional support** in Stella's life as Blanche exits. She takes care of the baby as well when Blanche is being removed from their lives.

SYMBOLISM

A Star

“Stella” **originates** from the Latin word for **star**. Stella, much like her name is the star in the household. A star can be considered a symbol of **light**, a beacon of **hope** and as it is never changing, **stability**. True to this interpretation, Stella is all of the aforementioned for both Blanche and Stanley. Blanche comes to Elysian Fields, looking for Stella who is her **last hope** for **stability**. For Stanley, Stella is his life, wife and mother of his child, despite his abusive behaviour, he loves her in his way and is possessive about her because she is his hope for an **enriching future** and **stable life** with their child. An **honest** and **open** character, Stella is the light her name carries. Furthermore, she is a **stable** character, unlike Stanley and Blanche.



Assessment Objectives

A04 and A05:

According to Mihaela Magdić, in 'Gender Stereotyping in Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire,

Stella “**escaped her old life only to create almost an exact version of it.**” Her agency was still silenced as she lived to please Stanley, adhering to his opinions and beliefs.

Note:

Use the writer's name (Williams/ Tennessee Williams) in your answers to show that you are commenting on his use of devices. (A01 and A02)

The 1940's Housewife

Stella represents the conditioned 1940's housewife who **lacks** freedom to express herself and is subjected to **male superiority and hegemonic masculinity**. Her role is to clean, wash, cook and please her husband. Stella can be seen as a victim of **economic domination**, restricted as she is dependent on an allowance from her husband, the question of her working never arises during the play. Stella does not question her role as a housewife either, so little is known of her ideas about this. We do know that is a **devoted wife** and keen and happy to have the baby of her husband.

Assessment Objectives

A04 and A05:

Women entered the American workforce in the 1960s, before which they worked only as librarians, teachers, social workers and nurses. This created a dearth in available work adding to the “homemaker” role.

While there were some clerical jobs available across America from the 1920s, they were treated as precursors to marriage. Married women were expected to remain homemakers.



"I pay our women well so they can dress attractively and get married." - Henry Ford

CHARACTER IN CONTEXT

Note:

Understanding the various contexts within which a text operates and comparing, connecting and contrasting these contexts will help you achieve AO4 and AO5—as it shows awareness of interpretation as a dynamic process.

Authorial Context

Tennessee Williams's mother Edwina Williams was a **Southern Belle**, born to a **higher class and well-read**, Episcopal minister and a music teacher. Edwina detested her husband's drinking, extra-marital affairs, and general lifestyle, believing that they did not reflect well on her as she had a certain social status to maintain.

Stella has been considered **a reflection of Edwina Williams' marriage**. However, Edwina was prone to psychological melt-downs more like Blanche rather than Stella.



Tennessee Williams

Image source:

<https://www.thisismysouth.com/tennessee-williams-house/>



Assessment Objectives:

AO5:

Leverich, Lyle in 'TOM: The Unknown Tennessee Williams' the relationship of Stanley and Stella to that of C.C Williams and Edwina Williams, Tennessee Williams' parents. Edwina, like-Stella, was of aristocratic heritage and married a lower class C.C who was an abusive drunk. Edwina despised C.c's drinking and poker games and they fought over it along with issues of money regularly.

Note:

Author's Context vs Reader's Context

The setting in which the writer creates their work is the author context. While the reader's setting when they consume said work, is the reader's context. In your essay, reflecting on the author's context and comparing it to yours as a reader will count for personal engagement with the text.
(A04 and A05)

Social-Historical Context

As a southerner, Tennessee writes about **the socio-economic effects of the lost Civil War** (1861 - 1865) on the South, despite the World War that has just come to an end when he writes this play. America was **peaking with economic change, industries, capitalism; and the working class was on the rise** when Williams wrote. The great old families that relied on slavery and plantations were now **replaced** as powerhouses based on capitalism and the powerful working classes. In this light, Stella represents the **renouncement** of the Old South for the more liberal New America. New Orleans is a contrast to Stella's Old South as it is rich with diversity, yet Williams paints a picture of **destruction and prejudice**, particularly to **women** in this "new and free" America. Stella may have left Laurel sensing its deterioration and searching for a new life, but the **patriarchy** still clamps down on her.



Philosophical and Literary Context

Williams uses Blanche in this **southern gothic tragedy** to look into the **binary notions of masculinity/femininity, dominant/subordinate, active/passive etc.**

Looking at the play through a **feminist lens** would see how gender and identity, particularly of women are reflected along with notions of patriarchy. The play is set in the American 1940s, where **women played traditional home-maker roles** and patriarchal values were very prominent. Patriarchy is defined by male dominance over women and women's dependence on men. In the context of the play, Williams successfully portrays the **patriarchy** and its effects. In the Kowalski household, we see the perfect patriarchal mechanisms as Stanley dominates Stella to an extent where he uses **domestic violence** to **assert his role and subjugate Stella**. However, when Blanche arrives, we see Stanley feels threatened by her presence and the threat she poses to his masculinity. He **lashes out** at Stella, because of this on multiple occasions verbally and physically.

Blanche's birthday dinner is a very good example of Stanley feeling threatened by Blanche—mainly because of the sisters' heritage— and he reminds them that **“Every Man is King”** and he is the king in the house. Albert Wertheim, professor and author considers Stella's baby as a **representation of a Kowalski future** and not a DuBois one; Blanche is removed from the picture while Stanley stays back— he wins the fight for Stella.

From a **Marxist lens**, we can look at the previously **bourgeois** Stella accepting the rise of the working class by marrying and dwelling with them. She is also **passive** towards the abuse and issues she faces.

In “Most Famous of Streetcar” **Siever uses** the **Freudian** understanding of the subconscious to translate the characteristics of Stanley and Blanche. Stanley is the Id, working on the animalistic pleasure principle which drives all his actions while Blanche is the superego that struggles to stand on Morality. In this understanding, Stella can be the **ego**, operating on the **Reality** principle.

Critical Context

Thomas **Adler** points out that Stella's friend circle consists of **battered housewives** much like herself, they find **comfort** and support in each other and develop **female bonds** over the **suffering**, something considered common with victims of domestic abuse. Like Adler, Harold Bloom believes Stella embodies the battered housewife who loves her husband.

J.M. **McGlenn** looks at Stella as **delusional** like Blanche, as she believes she is happy with Stanley who abuses her. Additionally, she turns a blind eye to the rape even though she knows it very likely occurred, furthering this idea that Stella in her **practicality is delusional** too.



KEY QUOTES

Note:

Textual analysis is imperative to uncover implicit meanings in a text.
Deconstructing important dialogues is vital for characterization.

Scene 1: “Don’t holler at me like that. Hi, Mitch”

Scene 3: “This is my house and I’ll talk as much as I want to!”

- The above quotes show Stella **grappling** with her **lack of power**. Stanley’s hegemonic masculinity and domineering self is **unwelcome** outside of their sexual life.
- The quote below is also an instance that shows Stanley’s overpowering **carnal male gaze**, with **underlying violence**, **objectifying** Stella. Stella’s only **retaliation** is a **sharp tone** and **feeble reproach**.

Scene 3: “[A chair scrapes. Stanley gives a loud whack of his hand on her thigh.]

STELLA [sharply]: That’s not fun, Stanley.”

- However, it should not be forgotten that Stella **enjoys** the display of his masculinity on many occasions.

Scene 1: “He heaves the package at her. She cries out in protest but manages to catch it; then she laughs breathlessly”

Scene 4:

“STELLA: He smashed all the light bulbs with the heel of my slipper! [She laughs.]

BLANCHE: And you--you let him? Didn’t run, didn’t scream?”



STELLA: I was--sort of--thrilled by it."

Scene 1:

"I like to wait on you, Blanche. It makes it seem more like home"

"blessed baby"

"stand up"

"as plump as a little partridge"

"You messy child"

- From the quotes above, we realize that Stella is treated like a child by Blanche. Blanche seems to **order** and **fuss** over Stella.

"You never did give me the chance to say much, Blanche. So I just got into the habit of being quiet around you"

- This quote gives us **insight** into their relationship from their younger days, and like their dynamic in the play, it seems like Blanche has a good amount of **authority** over Stella.

Scene 1:

"You'll get along fine together if you'll just try not to – well – compare him with men that we went out with at home."

- Stella **prepares** Blanche to meet Stanley and this quote clearly states the difference between the Old South aristocratic men and the New American working-class men.

Scene 4: "He didn't know what he was doing . . . He was as good as a lamb when I came back and he's very, very ashamed of himself"

- Stella makes **excuses** for Stanley's abuse and the **repetition** of "very" shows us the need for her to repeat it to convince **herself** and Blanche that the abuse was **atoned** for. She then **justifies** it further referring to the violence he displayed on their wedding night that thrilled her.

"No, it isn't all right for anybody to make such a terrible row, but--people do sometimes. Stanley's always smashed things. Why on our wedding night--soon as we came in here--he snatched off one of my slippers and rushed about the place smashing the light bulbs with it"

"But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant."



Scene 4:

“Stanley doesn’t give me a regular allowance, he likes to pay bills himself, but--this morning he gave me ten dollars to smooth things over. You take five of it, Blanche, and I’ll keep the rest”

- The above quotes serve to further the notion of **economic domination**. We know now, that Stanley uses sex as well as money to make up for his abuse. We also see Stella’s love and compassion for Blanche. The below quotes also further how **thoughtful** Stella is towards Blanche knowing how compliments help Blanche feel good.

Scene 2:

To Stanley “And admire her dress and tell her she’s looking wonderful. That’s important with Blanche. Her little weakness!”

Scene 11: “[To Eunice] Tell her how well she’s looking”

Scene 7:

STELLA [sadly and doubtfully from the kitchen]: Do you, Blanche? **BLANCHE**

[brushing her hair vigorously]: Yes, I do, so refreshed!

[She tinkles her highball glass.] A hot bath and a long, cold drink always give me a brand new outlook on life! [She looks through the portieres at Stella, standing between them, and slowly stops brushing] Something has happened!--What is it?

STELLA [turning away quickly]: Why nothing has happened, Blanche.

- While Stella disbelieves Stanley when he discloses Blanche’s past, but shortly after that, the above quote suggests that Stella **doubts** Blanche’s words and is considering everything Stanley has said. She also hides it from Blanche and turns her back on her to hide her emotions. **Foreshadowing** the ending of the play.

Scene 11:

“I don’t know if I did the right thing”

“I couldn’t believe her story and go on living with Stanley”

- Stella’s words show us that she **believes** that Blanche’s rape could be or is true but is picking her marriage and life with Stanley and their baby over Blanche. This is also **ironic** because we see that Stella, much like Blanche does, is creating a **delusion** to live under.



“What have I done to my sister? Oh, God, what have I done to my sister?”

- These words show the **guilt** that Stella feels and could **foreshadow** how she will live with this guilt much like Blanche lived with the guilt she felt for Allan's death.

GLOSSARY

- **Foreshadowing:** A literary technique where a writer drops hints or warnings about what is to come in the plot.
- **Irony:** When an outcome is intentionally contrary to what would ideally be expected.
- **Motif:** A recurring idea in artistic work and literature.
- **Nietzschean:** Nietzsche philosophy believes that humanity cannot rely on absolutes. There is no absolute truth but only many interpretations. Nietzsche proposed two forces that operate, the Apollonian and the Dionysian: the former characterized by purity, order, logic and a dreaming state of illusions while the latter is a celebration of chaos and instinctual pleasures.
- **Authorial context:** Also called biographical context. The life of an author can influence their works. Considering the author's past life-events and circumstances under which a work was created makes for the authorial context.
- **Socio-historical context:** Literary works tend to reflect the times and society in which they were created. Thinking about how a work criticizes society, and which social or political events are alluded to or recreated. The historical period in which a work was created and the societal norms at the point are a starting point for this context.
- **Philosophical context:** Most modern authors consciously or subconsciously tackle the recurring questions of ethics or existence. A work creates or represents reality in some form, questioning the nature of the works' universe can help understand the philosophical standpoint. For example: How are humanity and morality represented? How are God and death addressed? How is free-will presented juxtapose to fate?
- **Literary context:** While literary works reflect many aspects of life, they also respond and influence other literary works and fit into larger categories of literature. Understanding if a work fits into realism or modernism, or has aspects of both is looking at its literary



context. What other works or authors influence it? Did the author create other works based on this work? Such questions look at a works' literary context.

- **Critical context:** All works that are published, if noticed are critiqued. From rating it generically to looking and reflecting on a work's deeper meaning, critics will judge work and talk about what they like and don't. Time plays a crucial role in a critical context, time reveals greater works as they survive other inferior works.

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