

Struggles of an outsider: medea and a streetcar named desire



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The struggle of the outsider is facilitated by their isolation and their inability to form significant bonds with others in their community. Whilst outsiders have the capacity to challenge their respective communities, their struggles inevitably lead to their moral corruption. Reflecting the patriarchal norms of ancient Athenian society, Euripides's 431 B. C play *Medea* criticizes the effect of community pressure on an outsider's moral ethos. Similarly, Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1957) mirrors the collective consciousness of post-war America by demonstrating the mistreatment of outsiders by society. Although these plays come from different time periods, both composers acknowledge the struggles that outsiders universally face, and how society's injustices ultimately lead to their downfall.

Societal gender norms can cause the isolation and condemnation of female outsiders who struggle to express their individuality. This is demonstrated in Euripides's play *Medea* through the development of the titular character, who becomes isolated due to her struggle for female equality against the patriarchal Ancient Athenian society. Her subversion of gender roles is highlighted in Creon's didactic imperative to Medea of "A woman of hot temper... is a less dangerous enemy than one quiet and clever. So out you go... no more arguing." Here, the negative lexical chain of 'temper' and 'dangerous enemy' illustrates Medea's struggles with society are due to her rejection of traditional female emasculation. This leads to societal condemnation against Medea's struggle for justice, which is highlighted through Creon's exclamation "Medea, scowling rage against your husband!" However, Medea's rebellion against the patriarchy, and subsequent struggle

as an outsider, leads to her obsessive hatred. This is evident through her declaration to Jason of “ thus wretchedly your fate shall end this story,” which links the murder of her children to the struggle and maltreatment she has experienced as a result of Jason. Thus, Euripides reflects on the maltreatment of women in Ancient Athenian society through the character of Medea, and highlights how the struggle of an outsider can lead to immoral retributive acts.

Transposing the ideas of Euripides’s Medea, in William’s play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the patriarchal standards that predominated New Orleans in the late 1940s were criticized. This is indicated through the characterization of Blanche, an Outsider who struggles to conform to her community, which consequently leads to the degradation of her individuality. Blanche’s hysterical tone in “ I want to be near you, got to be with somebody, I can’t be alone” highlights her struggle to be accepted in society through conforming to the modes of male dependence that prevailed in William’s context. This can be further seen in Blanche’s statement of “ You haven’t said a word about my appearance,” in which the emphasis on physical beauty reflects her desire to avoid the prospect of being an outsider by complying to the stereotypical role of femininity. Consequently, when Stanley rejects Blanche, she struggles to realize the female obligations of housewifery and subservience. Hence she becomes an outsider with the desire to escape reality, as seen through the exclamation in “ I’ll tell you what I want. Magic! Yes, yes, magic!” Therefore, Blanche, much like Medea, struggles with the gender norms enforced by her patriarchal society, which have led to individual degradation. Thus, it is clear that gender roles have

throughout have facilitated the struggle and isolation of females who chose to subvert societal standards.

In addition, the struggles of an outsider are often harsh enough to corrupt the individual and can catalyze moral bankruptcy. Euripides' *Medea* highlights the corruptive nature of isolation as it ultimately leads Medea to commit filicide. This is highlighted in the sinister tone of "When I have carried out my purpose and achieved my wish," which emphasizes the macabre nature of the plan to kill her children, which she initiated as a result of her outsider status. Furthermore, the personification of "the fiercest anger of all, the most incurable, is that which rages in the place of dearest love", which creates pathos by emphasizing that the root of Medea's struggle is the rejection of her love by society and her husband. Indeed, this challenges the Greek value of self-control, 'sophrosyne', illustrating how it is society that constrains individuals to moral conduct. Nonetheless, Medea's immoral decision is still considered to be a violation of the natural law of Euripides's milieu, as indicated in "I am of a different kind, dangerous to my enemies, loyal to my friends to such a life glory belongs." The tri-colon highlights how Medea's corrupt decision has been destructive to the societal structure that rejected her in the first place. Therefore, it is clear that the struggle of an outsider can lead to their moral corruption, and the downfall of society.

Similarly, William's play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, highlights how the outsider's struggle can also lead to corruption, and the desire to escape reality. Indeed, Blanche's struggle to hold onto reality becomes tenuous throughout the play, due to her failure to adapt to the post-war society. This <https://assignbuster.com/struggles-of-an-outsider-medea-and-a-streetcar-named-desire/>

is seen in the use of statistical evidence in Blanche's aphorism of "I know I fib a good deal. After all, a woman's charm is fifty per cent illusion." Her struggles as an outsider to maintain appearances gradually leads to the degradation of her mental stability, which is highlighted through the symbolism of light as truth in her statement of "I can't stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark." However, unlike Medea, Blanche's outsider status is not a violation of justice in William's context but simply the collapse of her mental condition as evidenced in the fractured nature of her comment of "never for one moment since has there been any light that's strong than this — kitchen — — candle." Ultimately, Blanche's destabilized mental struggles leads to her complete detachment from reality, as evidenced through her final irony in "Whoever you are — I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." Therefore, it is clear that the struggle of an outsider can cause the corruption of the individual, subsequently leading to either unlawful actions or the downfall of their mental stability.

As illustrated above, a comparative study of Euripides' 'Medea' and Williams' 'A Streetcar Named Desire' emphasizes how the societal gender roles facilitate the struggle and condemnation of outsiders who attempt to express their individuality. Furthermore, the rejection of individuals, such as Medea and Blanche, can also become so overwhelming that it eventually leads to their moral corruption and breakdown. Both Euripides and Williams acknowledge the struggle of the outsider as a universal issue that will continue to affect our society even today.