

# A streetcar named desire essay

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



When the play “ A streetcar Named Desire” by Tennessee Williams was published in 1947, the gender roles in the American society were witnessing a shift. The two world wars and the resultant economic strain had forced the society to allow women to fill in many job positions which were traditionally considered to be men’s jobs. But once the war was over, the men again tried to dominate and tried to push the average woman into her domestic sphere. Written in this period, this play aptly captures the essence of the relationship between the genders, and their mutual dependence and conflicts. This essay aims at analyzing the portrayal of gender roles in this play and to compare them with those of the present day society.

Blanche DuBois plays the role of the Southern belle, who masks her true state of affairs with pretenses of virtues and culture. She actually is broke, whose husband committed suicide and she was fired from her job as a school teacher. She comes to live with her sister Stella, who has a rustic and insensitive husband called Stanley Kowalski, who seems to resent Blanche from the beginning of the play. Blanche has a brief courtship with Stanley’s friend Mitch, which is broken when Stanley digs out and reveals the shadowy past of Blanche. Eventually when Stella is in the hospital having given birth to their first child, Stanley and Blanche have an encounter, which turns violent, and Blanche is raped by Stanley. As a result of this, Blanche suffers a mental break down and is taken to an asylum. The play ends with these words told by Blanche to the kind doctor " Whoever you are, I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." (Williams, 1947)

The characterization of each of the four main protagonists explicitly brings into our mind’s eyes, the traditional gender roles of the 1940s society.

Stanley is a brutish, macho husband who believes in taking control of the entire household, including his wife. He is the sole bread winner and he naturally assumes matrimony gives him absolute authority over his wife's life. He is compared to a beast many times in the script and his nature and temper, reminds us of an animal like ruthlessness. He is self centered and has little concern about the consequences and effect of his actions, on the people around him. His character is summarized by his statement: " Be comfortable is my motto" (Williams, 1947)

Stella on the other hand accepts this authority unquestioningly and gives her full devotion to her husband. She is an embodiment of the society's notions about feminism – submissive and putting family before self. In today's perspective however, we would view Stanley, to be a chauvinist and an abusive personality, and Stella as an oppressed woman. But we can see from the narrative that, both these characters were completely happy and satisfied with their roles, and fit exactly to the ideal couple image of the society of that era.

The character of a Mitch though is devoid of the any gender arrogance and he acts sensitively to women. He in fact asks Blanche's permission in a scene to kiss her good night. By stressing on the refined nature of Mitch, Williams highlights the brutality of Stanley's character even more. Mitch is the tool through which Williams, questions and confronts the society's gender stereotypes. Mitch seems to hold women in high esteem which is clear through his repeated reference to his mother. But his sensitivity is laughed about by his other male friends, and in the end, even Mitch displays an arrogant behavior when he is drunk. Blanche is the character which

represents the ' old south', and her character is deeply affected by the nostalgia of the past. The old south was fading away during that era and a new political world devoid of class divisions was dawning. But Blanche chooses to stick to her inherited fake world, where she is of superior class to the others around her. She is a baggage of contradictions and she oscillates between being a gentle upper class lady, to a lustful emotional woman looking for love.

Even Mitch and Blanche would not have blended with today's society, despite their deviances from the average gender role of the then society. Today's men are considerate and do not assume total control of their wife's life. And today's women uphold their self respect and enter into matrimony in their own terms. Both men and women make equal sacrifices, and one is not expected to bury their desires and identity for the sake of the other. Though today's society is not completely devoid of gender stereotypes, it is much better than the one in which Blanche lived, struggled and at last succumbed her mental sanity.

### **References:**

Tennessee Williams. (1947) A Streetcar Named Desire. Retrieved from <http://www.theactingprofessor.com/downloads/files/A%20STREETCAR%20NAMED%20DESIRE.pdf>