

A streetcar named desire essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The play has been read as a symbolic exploration of the conflict between North and South and between the lost past and the harsh present. To what extent do you agree with the appropriateness of such a reading, through an exploration of the conflict between Blanche and Stanley. 'The Glass Menagerie' will be in many ways a familiar type of play to those who have read Tennessee Williams' other plays.

This play will be used in conjunction with his other works and other writer's works in order to prove or disprove as it may turn out, the opinion that the play "A Streetcar Named Desire" is a symbolic representation of the conflicting North and south divide. The symbolism used in this and many other plays will be directly linked to arguably the two most significant characters in the play, Blanche and Stanley, who both embody the opposing divisions of South and North, past and present and portray the clashing values that evoke the fury of new America and accentuate the misdemeanours of the harsh society that Tennessee Williams lived in.

Williams uses these two characters to centralise the perception that the antiquity of the past is disregarded and overwhelmed by the callous, unforgiving present. This observation will be critically analysed. Tennessee Williams vindicates through the characters, in particular the conflicting Blanche and Stanley and the symbolism he uses in this play, the wider problems of American society. This is evident as Williams clearly remarks about the broader conflicts in American society through the trials and tribulations of Blanche and Stanley, feuding throughout the play.

For example Stanley says Blanche is ‘regarded as not just different but downright loco-nuts’, depicting her as being dissimilar and out-of-place in the society he is used to. Blanche on the other hand speaks of him as if he were a ‘survivor of the stone age’ which is ironic, as he is meant to represent new American society, which again supports Williams’ unfavourable view of many aspects of this new world. There are many conflicting views upon who the hero and antihero is in the play.

Critics such as Esther M. Jackson believe Stanley is the hero, saying ‘his cruelty defends his world’, whereas other critics, such as Uta Hagan believe that Blanche is the tragic heroin ‘driven insane by the brutish environment epitomised by Stanley Kowalski’. Blanche is a character that portrays the struggles and mental battles a ‘Southern Belle’ must endure when forced to start a new life in a society which have clashing ideals, and for her, incoherent values and way of life. This is depicted in her confusion towards many of the happenings throughout the play.

For instance, when her sister Stella returns to Stanley immediately after being beaten, Blanche says ‘how could you come back in this place last night?’ To which Stella seems carefree and matter-of-fact about, saying Blanche is ‘making too much fuss about this’. This suggests that Blanche has found herself in an abnormally foreign world to her where nobody understands her and she cannot relate to anyone, not even her sister who has evidently by now embraced the values of this society. She is in many ways, ‘incongruous to the setting’ in her values and attitudes.

The foremost reason she clashes with such great strength with Stanley is that she is unable to adapt to her surroundings, as she is ‘daintily dressed’ and stays in this manner throughout, attempting to make her surroundings adapt to her arrival, which unfortunately for her Stanley cannot tolerate, eventually resulting in him punishing her for it. Blanche has had a hurtful and unfulfilling past, which is the reason she moves in with Stella and Stanley, yet her mind gradually deteriorates throughout the play due to her inability to let go of the past.

She is very contradictory throughout the play, for example she opts to use false pretences regarding culture and ethics yet she uncontrollably drinks, furthermore her unstable mental state and reproachful attitude towards her surroundings, saying only ‘Edgar Allen Poe could do it justice!’ goes a long way towards her being unwelcome in New Orleans society. By this Williams is suggesting that society is underhanded and unjust and he is preparing the reader for the key concept of which the play resolves around, which is tragedy. This is all perfectly portrayed by the critic Kevin N.

Laforest, who describes “A Streetcar named Desire” as being about the ‘senselessness of desire, about fading beauty and shattered dreams’.

Arguably the most significant symbol which depicts Blanches’ character is the ‘moth’, which she is described as being similar to early on in the play. This is a very precise portrayal of Blanche as she embraces the dark and more often than not remains in darkness throughout the play, moreover this is linked to her deceitful behaviour and supports the fact that she wants ‘magic’ in place of the truth.

Light reveals truth and is therefore harmful to her, so she covers the truth by shrouding herself in darkness, similarly to a moth though Blanche is strangely attracted to light despite the fact that it is detrimental to her. The paper lantern she uses to cover up the 'naked light bulb' she hates so much is a symbol Williams' uses to represent the virtual mask Blanche wears to disguise reality. Blanche is represented in this way by Williams possibly as she shares traits similar to those his schizophrenic sister, Rose possessed, where she also lived in an unreal dream world, unable to see reality past clouds of idealism.

Incidentally both Rose and Blanche lost control of reality and for slightly differing reasons, their own delusions resulted in their total mental collapse and their practical deaths. Loud noise is directly linked to Blanches' mental state. Noise from the L and N tracks and trumpets represent her inner turmoil and distressing past, while the varsouviana music is the tune that runs over and over in her mind as it is the same polka music which she heard the day her husband died.

This represents her anguish and guilt, and her inability to let go of the past so she may look to the future, another reason why she cannot adapt to life in New American society. Other symbols used to portray Blanche include her obsession towards bathing, which is used to show her desire to cleanse herself of the past and is a ritual she has to help her start afresh, away from her deceptions.

Alcohol represents her weaknesses and downfall, she drinks it as a means of escape from the harsh realities of life and pass more easily into her dream

world, not dissimilar to the actions of Amanda Wingfield in ‘the glass menagerie’ as they both incessantly endeavour to retreat to a world away from truth and fact. Stanley is a character depicted in complete contrast to that of Blanche. Unlike Blanche, Stanley, a ‘Polack’ represents the new and in many ways carefree north and along with the ‘Negro woman’ he portrays multicultural and ethnically diverse New America.

Williams does not hide Stanley and Blanches’ differences, highlighting them regularly during the play. Most significantly Stanley needs facts and does not enjoy lies or ‘magic’ as Blanche does, which is what possesses him to divulge into her past. Moreover Stanley’s vulgar, ‘common’ values and behaviour is depicted in complete contrast by Williams to Blanches’ genteel, ‘sensitive’ mannerism throughout the play. Stanley is directly representative of the power struggle between men and women, where he himself is used by Williams to portray a male dominated society.

This is evident throughout play during his conversations with Stella and encounters with Blanche. Near the beginning of the play Williams uses ‘meat’ as a symbol of Stanley’s predatory masculinity and dominance and immediately depicts his control over Stella as he heaves the meat at her and tells her to ‘come on’ to watch him bowl. This portrays the fact that Stella obeys and follows Stanley instead of their relationship being an equal one, and Stanley is allowed to get away with being insensitive to his wife and forcing her to live by his rules as is evident when he yells ‘I am the king around here! .

Despite this she does not leave him, and makes up with him soon after a fight, which makes her partially similar to the character 'Maggie' in 'Cat on a hot tin roof' who despite being virtually abhorred by her husband cannot imagine the thought of living alone and is startled when she is asked if that's what she wants. Her husband, Brick's sexuality is called into question similarly to Blanches' husband, yet he seems to be adamant about fitting in with society, which at the time was difficult if one is homosexual.

This may be represented by Williams due to his sexuality inhibiting him from fitting into society suitably. Stanley Forces everyone around him to come to his way of thinking, hence he represents the 'sub human' ethics of men in New American society, while the poker nights symbolise their blithe, inattentive attitudes regardless of what goes on around them. They are similar to catalysts, as are the men in 'The Great Gatsby', in which the men in the play devastate the life of a character named Daisy similarly to the way Blanches' life is affected by men, resulting in similarly transpired fates.

Yet their own lives in both plays are not affected at all. The second poker night is a strong symbol of the triumph of New America over Old America, as the fact that the poker games continue despite the rape and everything that has happened in the play depicts the ease at which the people in this society disregard and continue with life. This is supported by the critic Robert Brustrein who sees the play as a struggle between 'effeminate culture and masculine libido'.

Stanley not only represents male domination in the household, as his constant conflict with Blanche ends up in him winning in almost every way,

including keeping Stella's trust in him, despite Blanches' persuasions asking her to leave him, which is apparent when Stella 'fiercely' embraces him. The critic Balachandran feels that Blanches' failure to win over Stella was responsible for her eventual demise, causing her to 'face extinction'. Stanley exposes Blanches' lies and deceits at practically the same time Mitch tears the 'paper lantern', exposing her true self.

This portrays the exposure of Blanches' fruitless past, while the light represents the destruction of her self delusions, forcing her out of the safety of being concealed in shadows. Stanley rapes Blanche to make his victory over her absolute, saying 'we've had this date with each other a long time', meaning he understands that her fate was sealed once she attempted to alter the way life conspired around him, which he does not tolerate.

Tennessee Williams may have based Stanley on his strict overbearing father who he watched threaten and at times abuse his mother.

New Orleans is as aforementioned a diverse community, which many of the characters in the play represent. Characters such as Stanley the 'Polack' and the 'negro woman' symbolize a highly multicultural society, containing people from many backgrounds integrating themselves into New American culture, allowing an 'easy intermingling of races'. Other important characters that represent the transformation from Blanches' Old American ideals are, firstly the nurse, who is a physical embodiment of the New American woman.

She acts brutal and masculine and seemingly devoid of empathy towards the helpless Blanche, instead she aggressively restrains her and 'pinions her

arms', which is not the type of behaviour common in Old America. The doctor however represents gentility and not insensitivity compared to the nurse, giving Blanche what she searched for throughout the play, which was 'the kindness of strangers', despite this though he portrays the theme of death as he takes Blanche out of normal society to essentially keep her locked up, representing the harsh, yet necessary values of New America.

Therefore it is likely that Williams wants to portray powerfully to the reader the lack of remorse shown by New Orleans and New America, even those at the epitome of its social structure, such as the doctor. Tennessee Williams portrays, through the struggles of Blanche and the old genteel values of the South that she represents; the clashing values and ethics she comes up against in the form of Stanley and the 'New America' he represents- that society is ever changing.

Moreover an individual attempting to mould themselves into a culture unsuccessfully due to their inability to adapt will elicit the fury of those from New American society. Being a descendant of the Southern lifestyle for the early part of his life, Williams is aware of the conflict between the ageing values of the South and the widely accepted, yet almost 'callous' values of the North. The rape of Blanche is not only Williams' way of confirming to the reader of Stanley's victory over her, but it also represents his view of the ruthless eradication of Old America and everything it stood for by the triumphant New America. 3