

Literature Essay – Character

Question: Write an essay on the importance of Blanche's characterisation in conveying important tragic themes in play. You will need to cover relevant contextual issues and also QUOTE from the text to support your argument. Critical viewpoints other than yours may be used to further endorse your views.

It cannot be denied that, Tennessee Williams's masterpiece "A Streetcar named Desire" revolves around a multitude of characters, none of them becoming clearer than the protagonists, Stanley Kowalski and Blanche Dubois, the latter being the tragic figure following the path from self-destruction to insanity. The playwright's choice of language and style as well as a variety of contextual issues are highly effective in accentuating Blanche's character and heightening important tragic themes of the play.

To begin with, through the stage directions in scene one, we get a glimpse of Blanche's incongruous and odd appearance in the simple and unglamorous environment of New Orleans. Although Tennessee Williams wrote his plays for the stage and was eager to see them performed, his stage directions, of which the theatre audience would remain unaware, often go far beyond practical instructions and can only be appreciated when reading the play. Thus, the description of her unsuitably dainty dress ends with the ominous words "There is something about her uncertain manner...that suggests a moth", which hints at her fragility and her helplessness and foreshadows the tragic ending. Her choice of clothing is also important in many ways. Her white dress makes her appear ghostlike, which suggests her passivity and the idea of her being a ghost upon the stage in shadows. She is dead from within, having experienced the loss of family members as well as the loss of cultural heritage, being Belle Reve, therefore it could be said that she arrives in New Orleans in an attempt to find the light as she is always in the dark. Lastly, her comparison to a moth highlights her tendency to live in the darkness of the night, as like a moth she always avoids light bulbs. Just as the moth is scorched by contact with a bulb, her illusions are destroyed by the bright light of the truth that Stanley and Mitch force her into.

The play also reflects the cultural tensions that pervaded the nation after the horrors of World War 2 and Blanche represents the decline of the aristocratic families traditionally associated with the South, hinting at the ongoing power struggle between Blanche and Stanley, thus reflecting the battle between old South values and new industrial efficiency. Stanley represents the American Dream that all men are born equal and can succeed equally, whilst Blanche represents the old world, where class and race are still important issues. Her awareness of social distinctions first shows itself in the offhand manner in which she accepts both Eunice's and her neighbour's acts of kindness-"I'll go tell her you come"."Thanks". To Blanche these are services naturally expected of her social inferiors. Her attitude towards these two women prepares us for her condemnation of Stella's way of life, and implicitly, of her husband, again foreshadowing the tragic ending due to her inability to accept and treat him as an equal.