

EQ: EXPLORE HOW WILLIAMS PRESENTS VALUES OF THE OLD WORLD, AGAINST NEW, HETEROGENEOUS WAYS OF LIVING

Tennessee Williams's play "A Streetcar Named Desire" outlines the stark contrasts between conflicting worlds in order to morally challenge the audience and their conventional perspectives of life in a heavily divided 1940s society. The playwright instigates his characters as literary devices which act as foundations for the profound questioning of identity through sharp critiques of the old and new worlds deeply embedded in the backgrounds of each character. Although "Streetcar" is most overtly about gender roles in post-World War II New Orleans, a case can be made for a metaphorical interpretation that would comment upon the relationship between the southern and northern states at the time of and immediately following the Civil War. Williams evidently reminisces on the societal evolution that rocked the world views of genteel yet outdated folks, while industrialisation and immigration became key drivers of the American social landscape, and how this has caused conflict throughout the advancement of the 'New America' and the dissipation of the 'Old South'.

In this essentially Southern play, Williams explores the phenomenon of the "Southern Belle"; a figure that rests on a cultural and social personification, legitimising a certain interpretation of femininity, inferiority and subordination. In other words, her stereotype is merely constructed based on a fear that women "might escape the rule of the patriarchy" (Roberts XII), along with notions of manifesting a glamorous, aristocratic naivety while holding marriage as the highest aspiration of life itself, giving her something new – the aura of legal commitment. Hence, the character of Blanche DuBois appears to perfectly embody this tragic Southern Belle who has become accustomed to a certain level of wealth, and has been left adrift in the modern world. Blanche's introductory moth-like appearance immediately reinforces the air of fragility that surrounds her as Williams evidently underlines her unavoidable crash into a self-induced entropy within the very first scene of the play. Her "daint[y]" demeanour and "delicate beauty" becomes "incongruent", failing to harmonise with the rowdy New Orleans atmosphere which is saturated with sharp contrasts; old French architecture and new rhymes of jazz, an old world refinement mixed with the grit of poverty and modernity, decay and corruption alongside a regenerative power of desire and procreation. Consequently, the setting itself propels the conflicts and tensions of the play, beginning with Blanche's unsuitability in this foreign world wherein she feels a sense of "uncertain[ty]" as she is still very much attached to her decayed, Southern roots.

We soon learn that Blanche was brought up in an ancestral plantation home with great big "white columns" called "Belle Reve", a name that comes to translate to "beautiful dream" – something beautiful, yet intangible. Contextually, Williams encases the idealisms of the charm, dignity and genteel-like attitudes of the Old South in Blanche's ingenious palace – yet when this structure of ignorance collapses, Williams highlights, the figure of the magnificent survivor, the "Southern Belle", maintaining the stance of goodness against overwhelming destructiveness (modernity), is hopelessly flawed and ill-equipped to represent the attractions of what she attempts to preserve from her past. Hence, Blanche, in her fragility towards the blaring of a flame, remains prisoner of the traditional notions about women of the old cavalier