

# The Depiction of Women Characters in Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i  
književnosti i njemačkog jezika i književnosti

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**Prikaz ženskih likova u *Tramvaju zvanom čežnja* Tennessee  
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Mentorica: izv. prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

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## **Abstract**

The play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, often regarded as one of the best plays of the twentieth century, was written in 1947 by American playwright Tennessee Williams. One of the recurring themes in the play is the conflict between fantasy and reality, honesty and lies, best depicted through the female protagonists of the play: Blanche DuBois and Stella Kowalski. They are sisters, the last representatives of a once aristocratic yet now moribund family. Blanche and Stella are both dependent on men in different ways and they both live in their fantasies, choosing to ignore the parts of reality they do not like. The first chapter of the paper is thus a short description of the theoretical approach utilized in the textual analysis of the play. The second chapter focuses on the play's women characters: first, on Blanche DuBois and her relationship with her sister Stella, her brother-in-law Stanley, and her love interest Mitch; then on Stella Kowalski, her marriage with Stanley, and her relationship with Blanche, and lastly on one of the minor female characters in the play – Eunice.

**Keywords:** Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche DuBois, Stella Kowalski, reality, fantasy

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## Introduction

*A Streetcar Named Desire* explores the themes of reality, fantasy, lies, violence, and sexuality mostly through its women characters Blanche DuBois, Stella Kowalski, and Eunice. These female characters have different ways of coping with the conflicts in their life. Blanche is a chatty and fragile woman, who after losing the family home arrives to her sister's apartment in New Orleans. She avoids reality, preferring to live in her own imagination. Her sister Stella seems a happily married woman as her marriage to Stanley appears to have given her happiness and fulfillment. This is what Blanche desperately wants to find and fails in her attempts, which results in her becoming neurotic and alcoholic, slipping increasingly into insanity. Stella, on the other hand, seems to be happy and strong, yet ends up as a victim of domestic violence. Their dependency on men in the end does not bring them any happiness; on the contrary, they lose their independence and identity. There is also Eunice, Stella's neighbor, who offers Stella and Blanche shelter after Stanley beats Stella. She understands the Kowalskis' relationship because it mirrors her own.

In what follows, the first chapter will focus on the reading strategy – New Formalism and New Criticism – used during the analysis of women characters in the play. The next chapter presents the analysis of women characters in the play. The first character that will be analyzed is Blanche DuBois; the analysis will look into her mental state, her relationship with men and her sister, and her illusions. Stella Kowalski is the next character that will be discussed by focusing on her marriage, her relationship with Blanche, and her susceptible character. The last part of the analysis concentrates on Eunice, Stella's neighbor.

# 1. New Formalism and New Criticism

The reading strategies that will be used to analyze the female characters in *A Streetcar Named Desire* are New Formalism and New Criticism. According to Frederic Bogel, New Formalist criticism developed from the need “for a text to be principally a linguistic object, a piece of language: language that is rewardingly susceptible to various strategies of detailed formalist analysis or interpretation” (20). New Formalism focuses on the text itself rather than the author’s beliefs or historical and cultural contexts. It emphasizes the importance of close reading of a text because the structure and the meaning of a text are closely connected. As Bogel asserts: “As I see it, close reading – patient, inventive, detailed attention to how language works in a text – represents our best hope of getting beyond the clichés of superficial acquaintance” (23). The close reading in question can be explained in the following way:

I believe it is ethical to respect other people, by which I mean: listen to them, try and understand what they are actually saying, rather than just confirming our preconceptions about them, our prejudices. I believe it is our ethical obligation to fight against our tendency to project our preconceptions, that it is our ethical duty to attempt to hear what someone else is really saying. Ultimately, close reading is not just a way of reading but a way of listening. It can help us not just to read what is on the page, but to hear what a person really said. Close reading can train us to hear other people. (Gallop 12)

New Criticism developed as a formalist movement in literary theory. Allen Tate, one of the representatives of the movement, argued that “a literary text could not be explained by its ‘origins’: that it is a productive process which could not be simply reduced to its materials” (qtd. in Jancovich 94). Tate saw the importance in studying “literature as a process of production which transforms its materials, rather than to reduce the text to a transparent expression of its context” (Jancovich 95-96). According to Tate, literature could not be perceived as solely an expressive form, but the linguistic form of the text should also be considered.

## 2. Women Characters in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

### 2.1. Blanche DuBois

Blanche DuBois is one of the main characters in the play. She appears in the first scene all dressed in white, wearing pearl necklace and earrings. Her appearance is “*incongruous to this setting*” (Williams 5; emphasis Williams’s), she does not look like she belongs to a low-income area of the French Quarter. Elysian Fields is not the place where she expected to find her sister and where she would like to stay. She is very much interested in her appearance and likes to receive compliments, she even requests them directly: “You haven’t said a word about my appearance” (Williams 14). At one point, she even insults her sister’s appearance to make herself feel better, she says that her sister put on some weight, that she is messy, and that she should have cut her hair in a different way. Right after those remarks, Blanche talks about how wonderful she looks and how she has not put on any weight in years. Due to her insecurities, she puts down other people to feel better about herself. She probably does not mean to offend Stella but does not think about her words before she utters them.

She wants people to see her as a beautiful young sophisticated woman, so she feels the need to lie about her age and wears expensive clothes: “Yes, Stella is my precious little sister. I call her little in spite of the fact she’s somewhat older than I. Just slightly. Less than a year” (Williams 60). Blanche claims that Stella is the older sister, even though the truth is that Blanche is five years older. Blanche wants Mitch to like this young and beautiful version she created of herself, so she even refuses to meet him during the day and leaves the lights off when he comes to the apartment. She is afraid that he would not like her if he knew her real age and saw her wrinkles. She also lies about drinking alcohol because she does not want people to think that she has a problem. When she first comes to the apartment, she finds a whiskey bottle and drinks from it while she is alone, and when her sister comes, she pretends to see it for the first time. Blanche later tells Mitch: “I’m not accustomed to having more than one drink. Two is the limit – and three! (*She laughs*) Tonight I had three” (Williams 59). She is in denial about her drinking problem. She tries to persuade herself and other people that she is not an alcoholic, but she drinks very often and lies about it. She succeeds in fooling everyone for some time, but Stanley discovers it and tells Mitch

about it. Mitch confronts her about it, but she continues to lie. She cannot even admit to herself that she has a problem, so an accusation from somebody else does not make her confess. She also lies about her previous life in Laurel, how she lost Belle Reve and her job. She blames Stella for leaving and letting her take care of everything on Belle Reve. Blanche says that she could not deal with all of that on her own and that she lost Belle Reve, although she does not say how exactly she lost it. Later Stanley tells everyone that Blanche dated many men in Laurel and got involved in a relationship with her student, who was just seventeen years old, and because of that she was asked to leave the town. Blanche did not want her sister to know that, so she left out some parts of the story. Furthermore, she is nervous most of the time and at one point starts asking Stella: “What happened while I was bathing? What did he tell you, Stella?” (Williams 132). She knows deep down that her secret will once be discovered, so she is nervous and worried about her sister’s opinion of her.

Throughout the whole play, it is evident that Blanche purposely avoids light, one might say that she is afraid of light. This is because it could reveal her true age and appearance, and it could force her to except the reality. When Blanche says: “I like it dark. The dark is comforting to me” (Williams 143), this is an indication that she ignores the reality that does not correspond to what she likes and wants. She is not ready to accept her mistakes and the consequences that come from them. She constantly runs from problems and ignores them, until they finally catch up with her. She came to her sister after she was shamed for her intimate relationships with many men and her lay-off from work. Before that, she tried to escape her failed relationship with her husband by having affairs. Blanche wanted to run again after Stanley told everyone about her past, but she did not have a chance to do it.

Blanche’s relationships with men are not very successful. When she was very young, she fell in love with a young boy who was a bit different, but she ignored it in the beginning. Later she found out that he was gay and that he cheated on her with an older man. They pretended that nothing had happened until her husband committed suicide after she told him: “I saw! I know! You disgust me...” (Williams 115). She describes her first love as a “blinding light” and after experiencing such strong emotions, she did not love anyone in this way. Instead, she had “intimacies with strangers” (Williams 146), which did not bring her happiness. She was looking for something more but was afraid of getting seriously involved in a relationship with another man. Blanche was deeply hurt by her discovery, but also angry at herself because she did not help her husband when he needed it. She blames herself for his death since her cruelty drove him to suicide.

Blanche's relationship with Stanley is not very good, which is due to her pretense. She acts as she thinks a woman should act with a man, but he sees through her charade and does not like it. She, however, believes that a woman should create an illusion: "After all, a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion" (Williams 41). She flirts with him when they are alone for the first time. She flirts with her sister's husband just to feel better about herself. She does not even like him, but she wants him to like her. It is hard for Blanche to accept that someone does not like her or has a bad opinion about her. The opinion of other people matters to her very much. After her attempt to charm Stanley fails, Blanche stops being nice to him and starts calling him "Polack" and making other silly and insulting remarks about him. She even starts to hate Stanley after she sees the aggressive side of him. She tries to convince Stella that she should not stay with such a man. After realizing this, Stanley:

ruthlessly engages in exposing Blanche as a fraud, a prostitute, and an alcoholic, mercilessly destroys veils of "magic" Blanche wrapped herself in, makes her look old and cheap in the light of the bare electric bulb, and, by imposing his reality in the form of the rape on her, eventually wins. (Oklopčić)

Stanley does everything in his power to shame Blanche and convince Stella to send her away. Their conflict escalates when Stella is in hospital giving birth to her and Stanley's son. Stanley comes home after drinking a few drinks and rapes Blanche, thinking that he has the right to rape her because she has had so many previous partners that another one should not matter. After this, Blanche is not the same, she cannot face other men and her sister does not believe her.

When Blanche meets Mitch, they bond over their lost loves: "Sorrow makes for sincerity, I think ... The little there is belongs to people who have experienced some sorrow" (Williams 58). They both lost someone they loved, so they can relate to each other's pain. Their relationship is built on lies, so it fails when Mitch finds out that Blanche lied to him. She lies to Mitch, like she has done with everyone else in her life. She wants Mitch to like her, but she does not give him a chance to get to know the real her. Blanche also refuses to engage in a physical relationship with him as she wants him to think that she is "prim and proper" (Williams 95). When Mitch confronts her with her lies, she cannot pretend anymore. She tells him about her promiscuous past: "Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with" (Williams 146). After this revelation, Mitch does not want to get into a serious relationship with Blanche as she is not "clean enough" to bring her home to his mother, but that does not stop him from wanting to get intimate with her. She is devastated

by his response because she let herself feel something for a man for the first time after Allan and he just wants to use her. She cannot give herself to someone she has feelings for, he is not a stranger to her.

Blanche's name in French means "white woods," symbolizing something innocent and solid, which is in contrast to her character. She is sensitive, unstable, and living in her own fantasies. Her sister mentions many times that Blanche is delicate, lonely, and that people should be nice to her. She regards her as someone sensitive and in need of special attention: "She is. She was. You didn't know Blanche as a girl. Nobody, nobody, was tender and trusting as she was. But people like you abused her, and forced her to change" (Williams 136). Blanche lives in her own world, which has nothing to do with reality: "I don't want realism. I want magic!" (Williams 145). She has decided to live in her illusions because she does not like the reality. After Stanley rapes her, she becomes more delusional and starts really believing in her lies: "Stanley strips away Blanche's illusions and forces her to face animal reality. In doing so, he demonstrates that reality is as brutal as she feared. She has no choice but to retreat totally into illusion" (Bloom 87). She was unstable before, but after this experience, she is destroyed. It is hard for her to accept the harsh reality; thus, she starts more and more to believe in her illusions. She eventually loses a complete touch with reality:

Williams depicts the total defeat of a woman whose existence depends on her maintaining illusions about herself and the world. Blanche is both a representative and a victim of a tradition that taught her that attractiveness, virtue, and gentility led automatically to happiness. (Bloom 86)

Blanche lets her delusions run her life, she is completely devoted to maintaining her illusions alive. She acts as she thinks other people expect of her, especially men. She tells them what they want to hear and what she thinks society expects of her. She thinks that if she acts this way, this would improve her life, make her happy. It is certainly easier for her to pretend than to admit her mistakes. In the end, these lies, and her pretense, drove her away from all the people who were important to her, like her sister and Mitch. She cannot run away anymore but has to accept the reality. Her unwillingness to live in the real world is indicated by the Polka tune she often hears in her mind: "Williams uses music to indicate the moments when Blanche begins to lose control and move into memory. The polka is music particular to the memory of her husband" (Bloom 31). Blanche hears music that was playing when her husband died in her head, the music which no one else hears, which shows her unstable mental state:

BLANCHE: Something's the matter tonight, but never mind. I won't cross-examine the witness. I'll just- [*She touches her forehead vaguely. The polka tune starts up again.*] - pretend I don't notice anything different about you. That music again ...

MITCH: What music?

BLANCHE: The "Varsouviana." The polka tune they were playing when Allan- Wait! [*A distant revolver shot is heard. Blanche seems relieved.*] There now, the shot! It always stops after that. [*The polka music dies out again.*] Yes, now it's stopped.

MITCH: Are you boxed out of your mind? (Williams 141)

That music hunts her even after all these years and does not let her forget that tragic event.

At the end of the play, Blanche loses completely her voice and her mental stability. As Jacqueline O'Connor asserts, Blanche

has been effectively silenced and removed from the group. Blanche's dialogue during the last scene has led progressively toward this final muteness, for her speeches are substantially shorter and less frequent here than elsewhere in the play. Her only extended dialogue in this scene is the speech in which she imagines her death at sea. (12)

Blanche speaks less and less and eventually becomes ignored by the rest of the people present in the Kowalski apartment. This silence is not typical of Blanche as her storytelling and the wish to be the center of attention dominate every scene of the play except the last one. All her quirks, however, do not make a reader dislike her or make them happy that she experiences a downfall. On the contrary, the reader identifies with her and eventually feels sorry for her:

By presenting the weaknesses that contribute to her downfall in a comic light, Williams creates in the audience a degree of critical detachment from Blanche but also protects her from the audience's disapprobation by making her vanity and her role playing endearing to us though annoying to Stanley. (Foster 113)

## 2.2. Stella Kowalski

Stella Kowalski is Blanche's younger sister: "*Stella comes out on the first floor landing, a gentle young woman, about twenty-five, and of a background obviously quite different from her husband's*" (Williams 4; emphasis Williams's). She left Belle Reve in search of a better life. In New Orleans, she met Stanley and now they live in Elysian Fields in a small apartment. Her gentle and refined nature, typical of her aristocratic origin, is still evident, but she has decided to accept the raw and aggressive nature of her husband.

Stella finds herself most of the time caught between her husband and her sister, thus representing a bridge between those two opposite worlds: "Stella Kowalski's low self-esteem is suggested throughout the play. Not only does Stella allow her husband to control her ... but she even permits her sister, Blanche, to boss her around" (Koprince 53). Stella is very easy to control, so Blanche and Stanley try to bring her to their side, to have her as an ally. Blanche wants Stella to see the animal side of Stanley to make her run away from him:

He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There's even something-sub-human-something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! Yes, something-ape-like about him, like one of those pictures I've seen in-anthropological studies! (Williams 83)

Blanche wants her sister to open her eyes and fight for herself, but Stella has her priorities set differently. She is willing to overlook her problems with Stanley because she is not ready to change anything in her life. Stanley, on the other hand, wants Stella to stop believing to and taking care of Blanche. He wants her to send Blanche away and keeps convincing Stella that everything will be fine once Blanche is gone. Blanche's presence has brought up problems in their marriage. As Stella tries to please everyone and is easily influenced, she starts to criticize Stanley after hearing her sister belittling him and talking about his temperamental personality. It was easier to overlook this side of him before as there was no one to constantly bring it up. Due to this change in Stella's perception of him, Stanley becomes worried about his future with Stella and is ready to do anything just to get rid of Blanche as soon as possible:

Stell, it's gonna be all right after she goes and after you've had the baby. It's gonna be all right again between you and me the way that it was. You remember that way that it was? Them nights we had together? God, honey, it's gonna be sweet when we can make noise



in the night the way that we used to and get the colored lights going with nobody's sister behind the curtains to hear us! (Williams 133)

His speech has one aim only: to remind Stella of the fun they have in the bedroom, the basic thing keeping them together, as Blanche's presence gets in the way of their fun and their happiness.

Stella's marriage seems fine in the beginning, but it soon becomes evident that there are many problems in it. Namely, Stanley becomes very violent when he drinks. Once, after a poker night, Stella calls him a drunk animal thing and he becomes very angry and hits her:

*[Stanley charges after Stella.]*

MEN *[feebly]*: Take it easy, Stanley. Easy, fellow. –Let's all-

STELLA: You lay your hands on me and I'll- *[She backs out of sight. He advances and disappears. There is the sound of a blow. Stella cries out. Blanche screams and runs into the kitchen. The men rush forward and there is grappling and cursing. Something is overturned with a crash.]* (Williams 63)

After this incident, Stella goes to her neighbor's apartment and Stanley stays alone. Not long after this, Stanley comes looking for her and she comes back to him. Later, Blanche confronts Stella about this because she cannot understand how her sister wants to be married to such an aggressive person, but Stella makes excuses about Stanley's behavior – that he did not know what he was doing and that he was later ashamed of himself. She also states that he is usually violent and smashes things, adding that she was thrilled when he smashed the light bulbs on their wedding night. They have a fulfilling sex life, which is enough for Stella to be happy with Stanley. Blanche wants her to see the reality of it: "What you are talking about is brutal desire-just Desire!" (Williams 81). Yet, Stella is so blinded by their physical attraction for each other to see that there are no true feelings between her and her husband. Stella's willingness to tolerate his quirks and their dependence on each other makes that marriage work. Stanley also controls her financially. He pays the bills and gives her some pocket money. In this way, she depends on him and has little opportunity to be independent. She does not see abusive behavior as something that should be stopped, but something that should be tolerated. When her neighbor Eunice and her husband Steve have an argument and Steve hits Eunice, Stella justifies this by saying:

STELLA:

She and Steve had a row. Has she got the police?

STANLEY:

Naw. She's getting' a drink.

STELLA:

That's much more practical! (Williams 87)

Stella does not think Eunice should call the police or do anything about the abuse. According to Stella, she should just get over it and move on. She sees it as a part of marriage, which is not important if looked at the bigger picture. If man shows affection and says he is sorry for what he did, she thinks a woman should just forget everything.

When it comes to Stella's relationship with her sister Blanche, Stella defends her sister when Stanley says something bad about her. She regards Blanche as a delicate being and pities her. She tries to explain to Stanley that Blanche had a hard time growing up and that he should be more sensitive with her. She wants to find a way in which her sister and her husband could co-exist, but they are constantly fighting and putting her in the middle. At first, she is influenced by her sister's opinion and starts being rude to Stanley. Yet later, when Blanche needs her the most, she puts her own wishes first. Blanche tells her that Stanley raped her, but she chooses to pretend like nothing happened: "I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley" (Williams 165). Stella decides not to do anything about it and continues living with Stanley. She does not say she does not believe Blanche, but that she cannot live her life the same if she chooses to admit that her husband raped her sister. She recently gave birth to her and Stanley's baby, which certainly influenced her decision. She wants to maintain this idea of a perfect marriage and a happy family alive, so she sends her sister to a mental hospital. She is sorry for doing this to her sister, but not enough to help her. She just stands there crying and calling her name.

### **2.3. Eunice**

Eunice is Stella's upstairs neighbor and friend. When Blanche comes to visit Stella, Eunice lets her in the building. Eunice is curious and starts asking her all kinds of questions, which annoys Blanche. Later, she is the one who takes Stella in after Stanley attacks her. She understands her problems because she has an abusive husband too. She acts all tough with Stanley:

EUNICE: You can't beat on a woman an' then call 'er back. She won't come. And her gain' t' have a baby . . . You stinker! You whelp of a Polack, you! I hope they do haul you in and turn the fire hose on you, same as the last time! (Williams 66)

She yells at Stanley for beating his wife, but she does nothing when her husband abuses her in a similar way. They argue, she accuses him of cheating, and threatens to call the police when he attacks her but later forgives him. They pretend just like Stella and Stanley. Eunice is a submissive woman and she advises Stella to disregard Blanche's rape story: "Don't ever believe it. Life has got to go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going" (Williams 166). She believes, just like Stella, that a woman should not stand up to her husband but respect his wishes. She disregards his abuse because he shows her affection.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, women characters in *A Streetcar Named Desire* are dependent on men. Both Blanche and Stella believe that happiness can only be achieved through relationships with men. Blanche creates an imaginary version of life for herself because she cannot face the reality. She also ignores her drinking problem and constantly wants to impress other people, especially men. Stella chooses lust for and dependence on Stanley over her sister's well-being. Even though Stanley beats her, she decides to stay with him. Eunice, like Stella, is not ready to confront her husband and she encourages Stella to ignore Blanche's story about rape. Stella and Blanche have a special bond, they love each other, but in the end they both do not have the strength to take control of their lives.

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