Gender Stereotyping in Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire

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Humanističke znanosti, filologija, teorija i povijest književnosti

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ABSTRACT

A Streetcar Named Desire is a 1947 play written by the American writer Tennessee Williams. The play received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in the year of 1948. It is often regarded as one of the best plays of the 20th century and one of the best plays of Tennessee Williams. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a critique of post-war American society that put a huge amount of restrictions on women's lives. It criticizes the way women were treated during those years. In the first chapter, the definition of gender stereotyping is given with a special emphasis on the distinction between male and female stereotypes. In the chapters that follow, the analysis of gender stereotyping expands on the characters of the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* – Blanche DuBois, Stanley Kowalski, and Stella Kowalski. Each character is described through a set of stereotypes that define and shape their lives. The focus of the paper then shifts to a play *Belle Reprieve* that was created to talk specifically about gender roles and stereotypes in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Through a reversal of gender roles, the play deals with the stereotypes presented in *A Streetcar Named Desire* in a humoristic way.

KEYWORDS: Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche DuBois, Stella Kowalski, Stanley Kowalski, gender stereotyping, sexuality

INTRODUCTION

A Streetcar Named Desire examines the way women were treated in the post-war American society. It shows the struggle the women had to face in a situation in which they were treated as men's inferiors. Society, or in other words men, imposed many restrictions on them, which disabled them to live their lives fully. They depended on men to decide what their lives should look like. Through all women characters of the play, we see the roles they were supposed to accept without complaint, but also through all men characters we see that they also had to fulfill some roles imposed on them. Both men and women were raised by the society which taught them that women were created for one thing and men for the other and that there should be no exceptions to that rule. This play gives us an insight into the lives of Blanche DuBois, Stella and Stanley Kowalski and we will see how gender roles controlled and ruined their lives.

The first chapter deals with the definition of a stereotype in general and the definition of a gender stereotype. It is explained how and why stereotypes are created, and which stereotypes are usually connected with women and which with men. The following chapters then deal with the play itself. Each chapter offers an insight into the life and mind of the protagonists of the play as well as a detailed analysis of their characters. The first part deals with Blanche DuBois, and she is portrayed as a representative of the old aristocracy who tried to survive in the modern world but failed miserably. The second part is about Stanley Kowalski, who is portrayed as a strong, macho man fighting for his power. The last part explores Stella Kowalski, who is neither an aristocrat nor a modern woman. She is depicted as a woman between two worlds, belonging to neither one. The last chapter discusses the play *Belle Reprieve*, which takes the stereotypes presented in *A Streetcar Named Desire* on a higher level and deals with them in a humorous way.

1. (GENDER) STEREOTYPING

According to *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, stereotype is "a mental picture or attitude that is an oversimplified opinion or a prejudiced attitude" (Ember and Ember 32). That oversimplification or prejudgment is often connected with a person's previous experience with people. It is much easier to categorize somebody into a group than actually think of them as a unique, individual person. It is in a person's nature that, when we meet someone new, we tend to immediately connect them with someone similar in behavior or appearance. "Stereotypes help us predict other people's behavior, but they also fail to recognize individual differences and overlap between groups" (Ember and Ember 11). We make assumptions before we get to know a person. There is also the biological element which can lead to a creation of such beliefs about a "woman's" or a "man's" job. Because women are physically smaller and weaker and men are stronger and tougher, they take on different kinds of jobs – women often do more domestic things while men do more physical labor. Yet, that does not mean that these jobs and duties should be ascribed to all women and all men. In addition,

> even though biological factors may impose predispositions and restrictions on development, sociocultural factors have important effects. Culture prescribes how babies are delivered, how children are socialized and dressed, what tasks children are taught, and what roles adult men and women adopt. The scope and progression of children's behaviors, even behaviors considered to be biologically determined, are governed by culture. (Ember and Ember 19)

One form of keeping stereotypes alive and spread is literature – it is often used to create many different belief systems. What is also important about stereotypes, particularly gender stereotypes, is that the majority of them was created by men throughout history.

Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender defines gender stereotyping as "the psychological traits and behaviors that are believed to occur with differential frequency in the two gender groups" (Ember and Ember 11). It is a well-known fact that the most of literary works about women was written by men, and it were men who created the world-known stereotypes about women such as the character of a sacrificial mother, the wife, the Southern belle, angel in the house, a wicked stepmother, the mammy, etc. It should also be mentioned that women were not the only subjects of stereotyping. Men, actually, also have to bear the burden of stereotypes as they are often represented in literature as strong, macho warriors. For decades, that image was the only acceptable image of what is known as a "real man." Stereotypes are used to support traditional sex roles which include women being the nurturers of the family and men being breadwinners. Even today when the world seems to be a much more tolerant place and when many countries are, or are in the process of, accepting democracy, women and men still face prejudice that has been asserted in our culture centuries ago. Feminists started the fight for equality of sexes and, despite the fact that they have accomplished so much, there is still a lot of work to be done.

2. THE WORLD OF MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS IN *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*

In the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams uses a wide range of different characters to talk about the theme of gender stereotyping. The stereotyping refers both to male and female characters. "The shock of *Streetcar* when it was first staged lay in the fact that it was the first American play in which sexuality was patently at the core of the lives of all its principal characters, a sexuality with the power to redeem or destroy, to compound or negate the forces which bore on those caught in the moment of social change" (Bigsby 19).

The female protagonists of the play, Blanche DuBois and Stella Kowalski, serve to support the theory of female stereotypes. Through their thoughts, speech, and actions we are able to see how gender stereotyping works in the play. Even the marginalized characters, such as Eunice, show us that the situation that Blanche and Stella were in, is the situation that most of the women were in at that time. They all lived by the same rules, in the same world. Like Stella, Eunice ignores her husband's brute side and accepts only his affections. They have to do that because they have no other choice. They are all depending on male characters and are driven by sexual desire. They all subordinate their lives to men and are unable to set themselves free in order to live more independently. They live in a man's world, and in order to survive they have to play the role that is imposed on them.

The male protagonists of the play, Stanley and Mitch, also serve the purpose of showing how gender stereotyping included men as well. Stanley and Mitch represent two main types of men – one is a macho man – strong, brute, independent, driven only by sexual desire, and the other is a sensitive man, who believes in tradition, respect, love, and romance. Through the way the male characters interact with the female characters, Williams depicts the males as the more aggressive and dominant sex.

The relationship between Stanley and Stella vividly pictures a stereotyped world filled with weak, fragile, suffering women, and strong, crude, and dominant men. The world of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is the embodiment of a patriarchal society in which women have to fight for some basic rights while men are given privileges, and they will do anything to keep their position intact, which includes the subjugation of women. There is a constant war going on in the play and it is the power war between the dominant characters and the ones who want to gain control. Stanley Kowalski and Blanche DuBois constantly fight to gain more power, yet one of them is doomed to fail in the end – whoever turns out to be the weaker one.

3. BLANCHE DUBOIS

3.1. A SOUTHERN BELLE

Blanche and Stella come from an old aristocratic family of French settlers. Her family, among many others, were very prosperous and soon became rich plantation owners in the New World. Both Blanche and Stella were subjects of gender stereotyping since the early age. They were raised as Southern belles:

> The belle is the young, unmarried daughter of a landed (and thus aristocratic) family, who lives on a great plantation. She is of marriageable age, ready to be courted. Although she may be only sixteen or seventeen, she is regarded as being at the zenith of her life. Southern notion of their aristocratic origins assured that the belle would be protected from reality, championed, and wooed as benefits a princess in her realm. A young girl had few tasks other than to be obedient, to ride, to sew, and perhaps to learn reading and writing. (Seidel 6)

Even as children, they both have been taught that women are inferior to men and that they should act accordingly. They grew up to be beautiful ladies, submissive to the power of their fathers, and later of their husbands.

3.2. A NEW WOMAN

While Stella eventually managed to break free of the customs and expectations of her family and lived her life the way she wanted, Blanche was not that lucky. She had to stay at her family's plantation and take care of their business. Slowly, her world started falling apart. One by one, members of her family started dying, and piece by piece, their property was sold to repay debts.

Blanche remained stuck in the past even after she left her family home. She could not break loose of the ties of the past and that ruined her. As a Southern belle, she developed a romantic way of looking at things, Yet "it has a fatal weakness: it exists only by ignoring certain portions of reality" (Kernan 10). In front of people she tried to appear as a perfect woman, a real Southern belle, while actually her way of living was completely the opposite of the life of a Southern belle. She was taught that a woman must be graceful, honest and pure, that she should not indulge in any kind of immoral actions, and that her main preoccupation in life should be having a family and taking care of it. When Stella left Belle Reve and all of her family and husband died, Blanche was left alone. She felt lost and insecure. She was unable to deal with the new world in which the chivalry, manners, and customs meant nothing. Everything she believed in meant nothing to others, so she felt like her life was one big lie. She tried to fill the void in her heart with a lot of strange men and alcohol but even in doing so she was ashamed of herself and her behavior, so she tried to cover the truth with a lot of white lies, as she saw them. In a way, she remained a Southern belle because she still believed in some rules and customs that she was taught about, but at the same time she broke those same rules by sleeping around, drinking excessively, and lying about it: "Her life was a living division of two warring principles, desire and decorum, and she was a victim of civilization's attempt to reconcile the two into morality. Her indulgent past was a mixture of sin and romance, reality and illusion, the excesses of the self and the restraints of society" (Riddel 17).

After losing Belle Reve, Blanche had to find a job. Again, even in her profession we can see gender stereotyping. Of course, she broke some rules which demanded that women had no reason to learn and prosper, or go to college, but still she was once again restricted in her choice. She took a job as a teacher, which was considered a "clean" job reserved for women. As they were seen as delicate creatures, women could not possibly work any kind of job which demanded physical strength. Those jobs were reserved for the stronger sex, for men. Being a

schoolteacher, she was seen as a role-model. It was unacceptable for a woman, let alone a teacher, whose job was to teach others how to behave, to act inappropriately. Her promiscuity cost her her job. She also started drinking excessively during that period. “Blanche drank to induce illusion, to extirpate moral contradictions that stood between her and pure ‘Belle Reve’” (Riddel 18). She calmed her nerves and got her thoughts in order with drinks. The constant sound of the Varsouviana in her head was more bearable while she was intoxicated. Biljana Oklopčić summarized her whole character in one sentence by stating that “Williams portrayed Blanche as the last representative of the old aristocracy who tried to survive in the modern world by escaping to alcohol, madness, promiscuity and whose memories were bitter since they were burdened by racial and sexual sins of her ancestors” (1).

It was then that she decided to visit her sister in New Orleans. She arrived there full of hope that her faltered life could be changed and improved. The loss of her family and the plantation transformed her into a vulnerable, insecure woman; the new life she had to face made her even more miserable, uncertain of what she should or should not do. The bubble she lived in her whole life finally popped and she realized that the people created new belief systems, which she knew nothing about. Unlike Stella, who accepted the fact that the rules had changed, Blanche still believed in the old system but continuously failed it as she was forced to obey the rules of the new world. That led her to the verge of a break down and Stanley was the one who finally pushed her over at the end.

Although she possesses all the qualities a woman is supposed to have, the good and the bad ones, Susan P. Castillo claims that Blanche possesses some of the male qualities as well: “She is calculating, sexually aggressive, and physically courageous, as we can see when she brakes a bottle and brandishes the jagged edge at Stanley in order to defend herself” (162).

3.3. THE RELATIONSHIP WITH ALLAN

When she was young, she was in love with a young boy named Allan. She was head over heels about him: “It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow, that’s how it struck the world for me” (Williams 114). For the two of them, the only logical thing was to get married. They both obeyed the laws created by the society and at such young age they got married. However, she soon realized that something about Allan was unusual, “a nervousness, a softness, and tenderness which wasn’t like a man’s...” (Williams 114). He needed her help, her apprehension, but she turned her back on him. The way Blanche believed that it was her duty to get married, Allan believed that his being gay was an unforgiveable sin, which should be hidden by marriage. They jumped into roles which seemed like the only ones for them. Yet, Allan was not strong enough to live his life like that and decided to end it. After he killed himself, Blanche blamed herself for his death. That light that shone bright in her life was gone: “And then the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light’s stronger than this – kitchen – candle ...” (Williams 115). She was just a girl, but she believed that he was a perfect man for her and when he died she was left with a feeling of guilt and a huge void in her heart. Later in life, that void made her lead a life she did not want to lead: “Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers . . . I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection – here and there, in the most – unlikely places – even, at last, in a seventeen-year-old boy . . .” (Williams 146). She needed someone so that she would not feel alone, but she never thought that maybe family, what was left of it, could help her cure her heartbreak. She was taught that men were answer to everything, so she acted accordingly. Nevertheless, because she was taught that a lady does not go around and sleep with different men, she felt embarrassed, like she betrayed herself. So she lied to others, created an illusion of

another woman, a woman she desperately wanted, and needed, to be. However, her lies caught up with her and eventually destroyed her.

3.4. THE RELATIONSHIP WITH MITCH

In Blanche's relationship with Mitch, we can see the remains of the olds beliefs she was taught. As a Southern belle, Blanche was courted by a lot of gentlemen back at Belle Reve. All young men were cavaliers, they were like the heroes that save a damsel's life and sweep her off her feet. Mitch became Blanche's last hope of redemption. He was definitely not like the men Blanche knew back when she lived at the plantation, he was not a "high-brow"; yet, of all the men she encountered after she lost Belle Reve, Mitch was as much of a gentlemen she wanted as he could be. Unlike Stanley, who was a prototypical macho man, Mitch treated Blanche with respect and tried to please her. All he wanted in return was that she acts like her true self: "I like you to be exactly the way you are, because in all my – experience – I have never known anyone like you" (Williams 103). After her experience with other men, Blanche could not believe that she finally found a man willing to love her true self, so she lied to him, presented herself as that woman she wanted to be and believed Mitch wanted. She deliberately created a stereotype of herself, increased the standards she needed to maintain, all that because she could not believe that a man would love a woman like her. "She symbolized the civilized world that cannot face its essential a necessary self, and thus existed in a constant state of intensive anxiety (Riddel 21).

In a way, Mitch was very much like Allan. They represented one type of men – both were sensitive, careful, loving, unlike Stanley, who was a brute, and who treated women like his possessions. Both Allan and Mitch respected the women in their life and saw them as human beings. That is why Blanche wanted to be with him. She was so tired of lies and false standards

she followed for years and Mitch offered her a chance for a getaway, which she gladly wanted to accept: “I want to rest! I want to breathe quietly again! Yes – I want Mitch ... very badly! Just think! If it happens! I can leave here and not be anyone’s problem” (Williams 95). They were heading towards a happy ending and Stanley took away their happiness when he revealed the truth about Blanche’s falseness.

3.5. THE RELATIONSHIP WITH STANLEY

Blanche and Stanley are the two oppositions in the play. He was the one who pushed Blanche over the edge. His strong masculinity wanted Blanche to behave like her sister, to be obedient to him, but Blanche was never able to do so. Throughout the play, they lead a war for power – power over Stella, and thus, power in general. From the very beginning, Blanche disliked Stanley, she even called him an animal. She believed that he was a brute man, unworthy of both Stella and Blanche, and she wanted to convince Stella in that too. Stanley could not stand that Blanche tried to destroy his relationship with Stella, so he decided to destroy Blanche’s false image. He never believed a word she said about what she did and with whom she spent her time. Her illusion did not affect his perception, he knew that something was off about her. He was the one who took the final step, raped her, and sent her off into a mental institution. The stereotype, the false image Blanche created about herself, was destroyed by Stanley.

4. STANLEY KOWALSKI

4.1. THE MACHO MAN

The play opens with a scene where Stanley, in his blue denim work clothes, is walking with his friend Mitch and carrying a "red-stained package from a butcher's" (Williams 4). He starts yelling and calling for Stella, who appears on the first floor landing. Then he throws that same package of meat:

> STANLEY: Catch!
>
> STELLA: What?
>
> STANLEY: Meat! [*He heaves the package at her. She cries out in protest but manages to catch it: then she laughs breathlessly*.] (Williams 4)

From the very beginning, the play is teeming with male stereotypes represented through Stanley. We see him for what he truly is – a dominant male, the family provider, bringing home the meat, throwing it at his submissive wife who welcomes him home with a smile. Stanley is presented as the dominant male. His dominance is shown in his actions – when he threw a piece of meat at Stella, an act of an animal, and later on, when Blanche arrived, he took off his shirt – an act which Blanche certainly considered inappropriate but had to accept it. His dominance can also be recognized in his appearance:

> *He is of medium height, about five feet eight or nine, and strongly, compactly built. Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens.* (Williams 24-25)

He considers himself the master, the ruler of his home and wife. He has the power to decide how things will play out and he makes decisions that will only benefit him. He does not like to be disturbed or challenged and he definitely does not like to lose. He is loud and messy and nobody can say a word to him about it. Stanley and Stella's life is an example of a perfect patriarchal home; it is their little heaven. They are happy with what they have – Stanley is free to do whatever he wants and Stella is an obedient wife whose only duty is to please her husband, and she never fails to fulfill it.

He also likes to go bowling every now and then. After a hard day of work, he goes bowling with the guys and Stella often asks to come and watch him:

> STELLA *[calling after him]:* Stanley! Where are you going?
>
> STANLEY: Bowling!
>
> STELLA: Can I come watch?
>
> STANLEY: Come on. *[He goes out]* (Williams 14)

She is not allowed to play, only to watch her man play. In this, we can see another stereotype – a man is the one who is good at sports while a woman is not. Another thing that Stanley does is playing poker. He and his friends often have poker nights in their apartments which sometimes last long after midnight. Again, Stella is not allowed to participate or even comment on anything. She is supposed to either be in other room quiet or go somewhere else. One time, under the influence of Blanche, she complained about the game to Stanley which led him to go mad and hit Stella, even though he knew she was pregnant:

> STELLA:
>
> *Drunk-drunk-animal thing, you!*
>
> All of you-please go home! If any of you
>
> have one spark of decency in you

BLANCHE *[wildly]:*

Stella, watch out, he's--

[Stanley charges alter Stella.]

STELLA:

You lay your hands on me and -

[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.] (Williams 58)

When the whole thing was done, Stanley and Stella made up by being intimate. He bellowed under her window until she got out and then, without one word, they retracted to bedroom. "At the end, Stella was once more within her husband's primitive embrace, to which she brings the spiritual, even cosmic, balance that his unformed vigor demands" (Riddel 19).

Stanley can thus be described as an alpha man, a macho, who loves the power, and is capable to do anything do keep the order as it is. He even lashes out on Stella when she starts criticizing him. Up to the point when Blanche arrived in his home, he did not have the need to prove anybody that he is the king, everyone knew it. However, with Blanche's arrival, he sensed that things could change and that they would not change in his favor. That is why he started a silent war with Blanche – he needed to show her that he is stronger and that he will crush her if necessary. When he took off his shirt in the first scene, it was his message to Blanche not to mess with him or his kingdom.

4.2. BLANCHE'S PERCEPTION OF STANLEY

When they first met, Blanche tried to seduce Stanley like she did with every other stranger. She tried to use her lady charms to get him to like her, to see her the way she wanted. Yet, Stanley

saw right through her game and sent her off. She knew from the beginning that he was nowhere close to being a gentleman, or even a decent man, but she needed him to like her. She was depending on his patience, on how long he would tolerate her presence in the house.

After a few months of living with him, she was sure that what she first thought of him was true. She was disgusted by him and could not believe that her sister would tolerate such behavior:

> 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 yeti Yes, something-ape-like about him, like one of those pictures. I've seen in-anthropological studies! Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is--Stanley Kowalski, survivor of the stone-age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle! (Williams 74)

They had different ideas of how men should look like and behave. Blanche still believed that they should be gentlemen, respectful of their better halves, while Stanley was brought up on different kind of belief – being a powerful male who is in charge of his family because he provides for it is the only way he knows how to live.

5. STELLA KOWALSKI

Stella is a transitive type of a woman. She is neither a Southern belle nor a modern woman. Stella was also raised as a Southern belle but, unlike Blanche, she saw the change in the world and society and decided to abandon the ship while she still could. She left her family home and ended up with Stanley. Even though it may seem like she escaped the life that was imposed on her since the early childhood, when the life she created on her own is observed better, it can be concluded that she actually never escaped anything. She only ended up having almost exactly the same life as the one that was imposed on her.

She escaped her old life only to create almost an exact version of it. She married young and ended up being a housewife and a mother. The only thing that she managed to change is the fact that she made all of the decisions on her own, without being pressured by society. Nonetheless, she chose poorly. She and Stanley were attracted to each other purely in sexual terms. In that way, she was different from Blanche – she embraced her sexuality and was not afraid to show it. “While Blanche is driven by guilt over the indulgence she took part into, that same indulgence gives Stella and Stanley a vital intensity” (Riddel 17). They stayed together for that same physical attraction. It made her stay with Stanley even when she was treated like a lower human being. It made her look away from all the negative traits that Stanley possessed and focus only on the good things that he gave her.

She married him and created a life of submissiveness. Her only responsibilities were to keep Stanley happy. So she became a housewife, who looked pretty, kept her home in check, prepared the meals, while also doing anything Stanley wanted her to do. She did not work, but asked him for the money when she needed it, and it was up to him if he would give it to her or not. She had no right to express her opinion, at least, she had no right to express an opinion that was different from Stanley’s. She had to put up with his messiness and mood swings. While he

was loud and disrespectful, she had to keep quiet and smile. We can see in her every stereotype that was ever connected with women, but what is even sadder is the fact that she embraced those stereotypes and believed in them.

6. *BELLE REPRIEVE*

Tennessee Williams's play has been recycled so many times that it has taken a status of a cultural artifact. The play *Belle Reprieve* especially stands out when it comes to the theme of gender stereotyping in *A Streetcar Named Desire* as it was created specifically to talk about the gender roles in Williams's play.

It was first presented at London's Drill Hall in January 1991. It is a work written and performed by Bette Bourne and Paul Shaw, members of the gay British group Bloolips, and Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, members of a lesbian-identified off-off Broadway group. In this play, Blanche is played by Bette Borne, "as 'a man in a dress,' Stanley is played by Peggy Shaw, as a 'butch lesbian,' Mitch is played by Paul Shaw, as a 'fairy disguised as a man,' and Stella by Lois Weaver as a 'woman disguised as a woman'" (Geis 2). With this reverse of gender roles, the play creates a funny commentary on the sexual roles presented in Williams's text. During the play, the characters talk about gender roles and sexuality in the play but also in the real life. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* the end is not optimistic for any of the characters – Blanche is crazy, Stella finally realized what kind of man Stanley truly is, Mitch lost all hope of finding love, and Stanley may have lost Stella, at least, her affections. In *Belle Reprieve*, the play ends with the characters tap-dancing out of the scene, they are saved from their roles and fates.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, Williams perfectly managed to describe and bring to life gender roles that were imposed on both women and men for centuries. *A Streetcar Named Desire* offers an insight into the lives of three very different characters who all fell under the influence of society and orchestrated their lives according to the rules of that same society. Stella and Blanche, women living in a man's world, showed the fight all women had to have in order to break free of social standards. Unfortunately, neither had enough strength to take control over their lives. Mitch and Stanley, on the other hand, show us that they, too, had some standards which they had to obtain. Yet, unlike Stella and Blanche, they did not seem to have a problem with that. The one who had a problem with the rules that applied to men was Allan and the way his life ended shows us that it was not easy for him either. Stanley and Mitch did not have problems with the society because they conformed to it and lived by the rules willingly. Allan's suicide and Blanche's madness were the proof that something was wrong with the world they were living in and that some changes had to be made.

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