

Feminist Theory Applied to *A Streetcar Named Desire*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.

Three main areas of study/points of criticism:

1. differences between men and women
2. women in positions of power and power dynamics between men and women
3. the female experience

1. Differences between men and women

- The basic assumption is that gender determines everything, including values and language.
- The canon must be expanded to include the study of those genres in which women “traditionally” write: journals, diaries, and personal letters.
- Note the differences in the topics or issues about which men and women write and the perspectives from which they write about them.

2. Women in positions of power and power dynamics between men and women

- Note and confront the social, economic, and political exploitation of women. Note whether women have any power and of what variety it is.
- Society has not treated all of its constituencies fairly, and literature is a means by which inequities can be identified, protested, and possibly rectified.
- Note the division of labor and economics between men and women.
- Note how men and women interact with one another in a variety of contexts (romantic, professional, etc.). Does the woman act in any way subservient to the man? Does the man treat the woman like an adult? A political and economic equal?

3. The female experience

- A woman’s experience of life is different from a man’s on the most basic level. Examine what aspects of feminine life are included in the work. Note the point of view through which the events are told. Is it male or female? Pay attention to how the narrator, male or female, treats the events. For example, are they depicted with sensitivity, harshness, etc.?

- Reject the application of male standards to the female personality. Feminists believe that the female personality is a separate entity from the male personality, and if judged by the same measures, is judged incorrectly. The female personality must be judged independently from the male personality and vice versa.
- Examine, and possibly celebrate, the creative, life-giving role of femininity. Although women have traditionally been portrayed as dependent on men for everything, the fact is that men are dependent on women for the most basic necessity in the world—birthing children. A male’s relationship to his mother has always been portrayed as a very strong bond (whether in the Freudian theory of the Oedipal complex or modern phrases such as “Mama’s boy”).
- Explore the concept that men and women are both incomplete without each other (women cannot conceive without men, etc.) not of feminine “incompleteness” alone (Adam’s rib, Freudian theories on sexuality, etc.). ■

Essential Questions for A Feminist Reading

1. What stereotypes of women are present? Are female characters oversimplified? Weak? Foolish? Excessively naive?
2. Do the female characters play major or minor roles in the action of the work? Are they supportive or independent? Powerless or strong? Subservient or in control?
3. If the female characters have any power, what kind is it? Political? Economic? Social? Psychological?
4. How do the male characters talk about the female characters?
5. How do the male characters treat the female characters?
6. How do the female characters act toward the male characters?
7. How do the female characters act toward each other?
8. Is the work, in general, sympathetic to female characters? Too sympathetic?
9. Are the female characters and situations in which they are placed oversimplified or presented fully and in detail?
10. What are the predominant images? Are they images usually associated with women? Why or why not?
11. Do any of the work's themes touch upon any idea that could be seen as a feminist issue? Is the theme supportive or disparaging of women?
12. Overall, do you think that the female characters are believable (based on women you know)? For that matter, do you think that the male characters are believable?

Focus of the Study

- Examine the portrayal of women as dependent upon men
- Explore the depiction of domestic violence
- Analyze the rape in Scene Ten as an expression of male dominance

Activity One

Analyzing the Portrayal of Women as Dependent Upon Men

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *A Streetcar Named Desire: Activity One Selected Passages and Questions*. You may want to distribute the handout in advance and ask students to read the assigned passages before class to provide more time for discussion.
2. Divide the students into two groups or a number of smaller groups divisible by two.
3. Ask each group to read the assigned passages before answering the questions. The groups will read the same passages before answering different questions.
4. Reconvene the class and ask a representative of each group to present its answers.
5. As a class, explore and discuss the following final questions.
 - What is the playwright's attitude toward women? How does he communicate this attitude?
 - How are Blanche and Stella alike in their responses toward men? How are they different?

A Streetcar Named Desire: Feminist Activity One**Selected Passages****Scene One**

[Two men come around the corner, Stanley Kowalski and Mitch

Stella: Be over soon.

Scene Three

Blanche: Where is my little sister? Stella? Stella?

Blanche: Yes. *[During the pause, she looks up at the sky.]* There's so much—so much confusion in the world. *[He coughs diffidently.]* Thank you for being so kind! I need kindness now.

Scene Four

Blanche: I take it for granted that you still have sufficient memory of Belle Reve. *[As the lights fade away, with a lingering brightness on their embrace, the music of the “Blue Piano” and the trumpet and drums is heard.]*

Scene Five

Stanley: Shaw must've got you mixed up .

Blanche: Have you been listening to me?

Scene Six

Blanche: I think you have a great capacity for devotion.

Blanche: Sometimes—there's God—so quickly!

Scene Seven

Stella: I don't believe all those stories and I think your supply man was mean and rotten to tell them. *[The distant piano goes into hectic breakdown.]*



Scene Eight

Blanche: QUIET IN THERE! [*He is with her now, supporting her with his arm, murmuring indistinguishably as they go outside.*]

Scene Nine

All

Scene Eleven

Stella: I—just told her that—we'd made arrangements for her to rest in the country.

Stella: Yes, Blanche. [*To Eunice*] Tell her how well she's looking.

Blanche: I can smell the sea air.

Stanley: She says she forgot something.

Stanley: You left nothing here but spilt talcum.

Steve: This game is seven-card stud.



A Streetcar Named Desire: Feminist Activity One

Questions for Group A

Examining Blanche's Dependence Upon Men

1. How does Blanche see herself in relation to men? Does she consider herself superior or needy? Please find specific examples.

2. What evidence is there that Blanche is independent?

3. What evidence is there that Blanche is dependent on men?

4. How has her independence or dependence determined the course of her life?

5. How does Williams use dialogue and stage directions to establish Blanche's independence or dependence upon men?

6. In what ways is Blanche's relationship with Stanley similar to her relationships with other men? How is it different?



A Streetcar Named Desire: Feminist Activity One

Questions for Group B

Examining Stella's Dependence Upon Men

1. How does Stella see herself in relation to men? Does she consider herself superior or needy? Please find specific examples.

2. What evidence is there that Stella is independent?

3. What evidence is there that Stella is dependent on men?

4. How has her independence or dependence determined the course of her life?

5. How does Williams use dialogue and stage directions to establish Stella's independence or dependence upon men?



6. In what ways is Stella's relationship with Stanley mutually beneficial? In what ways is it destructive?

Activity Two**Discerning the Playwright's Attitude Toward Domestic Violence**

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *A Streetcar Named Desire: Activity Two Selected Passages and Questions*.
2. Divide the students into an even number of groups.
3. Designate half the groups as "A" and half as "B."
4. Have each group read the assigned passages before answering the questions.

NOTE: The groups will read the same passages before answering different questions.

5. Reconvene the class and ask a representative of each group to present its answers.
6. As a class, discuss the following questions:
 - What is the prevailing attitude on Elysian Fields Avenue toward domestic violence?
 - Does the play seem to condone or condemn domestic violence? In what ways?



A Streetcar Named Desire: Feminist Activity Two

Selected Passages

Scene Three

There is a picture of Van Gogh's of a billiard parlor. [Steve and Pablo laugh. The sisters appear around the corner.]

[The bathroom door opens and Stella comes out].

Blanche: Yes. *[During the pause, she looks up at the sky.]* There's so much—so much confusion in the world. *[He coughs diffidently.]* Thank you for being so kind! I need kindness now.

Scene Five

A disturbance is heard upstairs at the Hubbells' apartment.]

Stanley: You can count on it up to five hundred.

Stanley: Shaw must've got you mixed up.

Blanche: I have to admit, I love to be waited on.

Stella: It *will* happen!

Blanche: Ah me, ah, me, ah, me.

Scene Eight

Three-quarters of an hour later.

Blanche: Then let me tell one.

Blanche: Apparently Mr. Kowalski was not amused.

Blanche: What happened while I was bathing? What did he tell you, Stella?

Stanley: Stell, it's gonna be all right after she goes. *[He is with her now, supporting her with his arm, murmuring indistinguishably as they go outside.]*

Scene Ten

Stanley: As a matter of fact, there wasn't no wire at all.

Stanley: We've had this date with each other from the beginning.

Scene Eleven

Stanley: You left nothing here but spilt talcum. [*Stella rushes into Eunice's embrace.*]

[*The poker players stand back.*]

[*The luxurious sobbing, the sensual murmur fade.*]



A Streetcar Named Desire: Feminist Activity Two

Questions for Group A

1. How does Williams use scenery, dialogue, and lighting at the beginning of Scene Three to establish conditions that are apt to produce domestic violence?

2. How does Williams use musical themes to underscore and punctuate the action in Scene Three?

3. Does the argument over the radio in Scene Three seem to be a unique event or a typical occurrence? What evidence supports this?

4. What purpose does the offstage conflict between the Hubbells serve?

5. What does Stella's response (end of Scene Three and beginning of Scene Four) to Stanley's behavior suggest about her? About Stanley? About their marriage?



6. What do Stanley's and Stella's behavior at the end of the play suggest about the future?



A Streetcar Named Desire: Feminist Activity Two

Questions for Group B

1. How does Williams use scenery, dialogue, lighting, and costume notes in Eight Scene to heighten the tension and set the stage for the ensuing conflict between Stella and Stanley?

- A. In Scene Eleven?

2. What details does the playwright include that might encourage an audience to feel sympathy for Stanley? What details does the playwright include that might lessen audience sympathy for Stanley?

3. How does Williams use music to punctuate the action in Scenes Eight, Ten, and Eleven?

4. Is Stanley's *anger* in Scene Eight justified? How? Are his *actions* justified? How?



5. Is Stanley's *anger* in Scene Ten justified? How? Are his *actions* justified? How?

6. What do Stanley's and Stella's behavior at the end of the play suggest about the future?



Activity Three

Examining Blanche's Rape as Either Dramatic Device or Misogynistic Statement

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *A Streetcar Named Desire*: Feminist Activity Three Questions and *A Streetcar Named Desire* Feminist Activity Three: Analyzing Rising Action and Climax.
2. As a class, review the sequence of events as well as the progression of moods that culminate in the rape in Scene Ten:
 - What is Blanche doing at the beginning of the scene? What is her frame of mind?
 - What has Stanley been doing immediately prior to his entrance? What is *his* frame of mind?
 - What is Blanche's disposition at learning she will be alone in the apartment with Stanley? Why?
 - What is Stanley's initial mood when telling Blanche that they will be alone? Why?
 - At what point in the scene does the mood change for Blanche? What does the mood change to?
 - At what point in the scene does the mood change for Stanley? What does the mood change to?
3. Divide the class into pairs or small groups.
4. Have each group examine the play and complete the graphic and answer the questions on the handout.
5. Reconvene the class and allow each group to report its findings.
6. As a class, discuss the following questions:
 - What does Stanley mean when he says, "We've had this date with each other from the beginning"?
 - By showing Blanche flirting with Stanley in earlier scenes, is Williams suggesting that her rape in Scene Ten is an act of poetic justice?
 - Does Blanche's relationship with Mitch alter the audience's reaction to Blanche's rape? Why or why not?



A Streetcar Named Desire: Feminist Activity Three

Questions

1. How does the introduction of Stanley in Scene One foreshadow the rape in Scene Ten?

2. How does Blanche's initial reaction to Stanley suggest the start of their conflict?

3. What does Blanche's flirtation with Stanley in Scene Two suggest about her character? How might it affect the audience's response to what will happen later?

4. Does Blanche's history of promiscuity make her more susceptible to rape? Why or why not?

5. What do Blanche's words and actions in Scene Five suggest about her? How might they affect the audience's response to what will happen later?



6. What does Stella's reaction to the rape at the end of the play suggest about her? About the overall situation?

7. What dramatic purpose does the rape serve?

A. How does it affect the other characters?

• Stanley:

• Stella:

• Mitch:

8. What other possible events would have achieved the same dramatic purpose?



9. Overall, how sympathetic is the audience to each of the characters *before* the rape? Why?

- Blanche:

- Stanley:

- Stella:

- Mitch:

10. How sympathetic is the audience to each of the characters *after* the rape? Why?

- Blanche:



• Stanley:

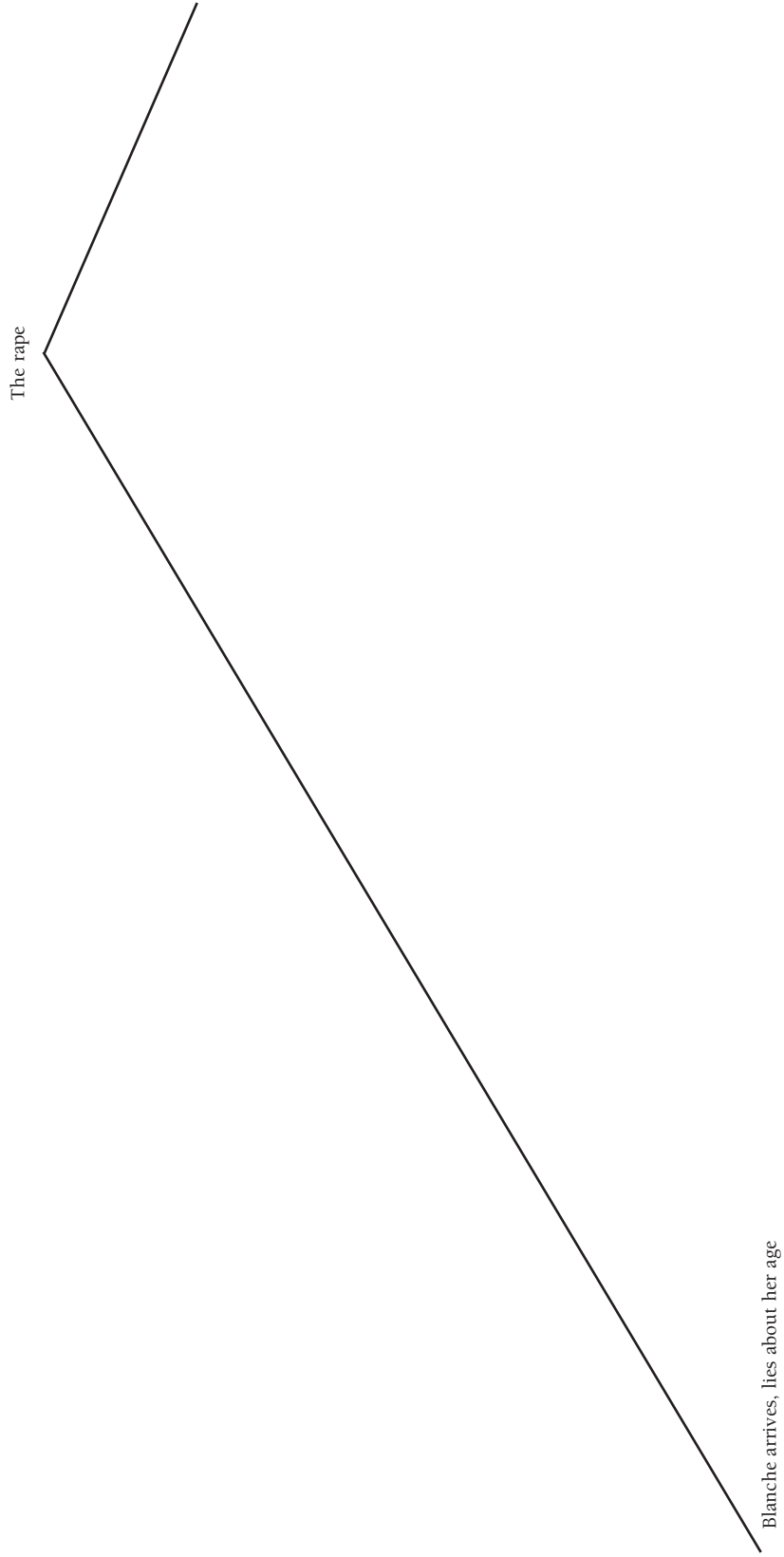
• Stella:

• Mitch:

A Streetcar Named Desire: Feminist Activity Three

Analyzing Rising Action and Climax

Use the graphic below to chart the key plot events in the rising action of the play that prefigure and lead to the climactic rape in Scene Ten. Include plot events that reveal character and may potentially suggest motivation as well.



Discussion Questions

1. What female stereotypes do the various female characters—Blanche, Stella, Eunice— display? Are these stereotypes central to their characters? Central to the plot?
2. What types of power do the male characters hold over the female characters?
3. Is the play, overall, sympathetic to women? Sympathetic to men? Why or why not? What is Williams's point in placing these characters in this situation?

Essays or Writing Assignments

1. Tennessee Williams wrote that he originally intended for Blanche to be the most sympathetic character in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In a well-reasoned and well-developed essay, argue whether or not he succeeded. Be certain to include a discussion of how Williams manages to create audience sympathy for her or why she ultimately loses that sympathy.
2. Support, refute, or qualify the thesis that Blanche and Stella, rather than being fully developed characters, are mere character types or stereotypes. Be certain to support all of your claims with direct references to the play.