

'Despite her tragic qualities, the audience finds it hard to feel any sympathy for Blanche.' In the light of this comment, explore Williams' dramatic presentation of Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire – Sophie YM

One could argue that 'A Streetcar Named Desire' is presented in the form of a Greek tragedy, for it shares many similar aspects. It requires a 'tragic hero', a protagonist who is essentially good in nature and whose tragic downfall is a result of a fatal flaw of hamartia with the tragic result being entirely their own doing. References to the Greek classics when analysing Streetcar is not entirely unheard-of given Williams' own reference to Book VI of Virgil's Aeneid through the place name of Elysian Fields. Thus, with a Greek form established, with the aim of evoking pity and fear from the audience, one could argue that, as an audience, we are dramatically predisposed to sympathise with Blanche as a tragic heroine. However, as a relatively 'modern' societal commentary, Williams may have subverted the classical form somewhat, thus leaving the audience to reconsider the extent to which Blanche deserves our sympathy.

Blanche is presented as being an incredibly flawed protagonist, highlighting several possibilities for her hamartia. Her first flaw is presented in the very first scene, prior to any of Blanche's speech. Whilst Elysian Fields and its 'raffish charm' and 'atmosphere of decay', Blanche emerges 'incongruous to this setting...as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district.' Instantaneously, the stage directions present Blanche as an outsider; delicate compared to the bustling of New Orleans. The simile comparing Blanche's appearance to that of an aristocratic pastime highlights a class difference whilst also the change of priorities from the Old South to the emerging society of New Orleans. The theme of outsiders is a very personal trope of Tennessee Williams, who moved from southern Mississippi to St Louis, and was branded an outsider both for his homosexuality and his southern descent. Thus, Williams' recognises the pathos-worthy nature of outsiders and implores it through many of his works. Yet, Blanche's status as an outsider cannot be her hamartia as it is not integral to her character as a whole – it is a somewhat derogatory label imposed by the society in which she finds herself, not the nature of her character. Therefore, though this branding deserves sympathy through the unfortunate circumstances one finds herself in, we cannot empathise with it being her 'hamartia' within this Greek-~~esk~~ tragedy.

Nevertheless, what could more plausibly be argued to be her hamartia is presented not long after Blanche's arrival. "Blanche sits in a chair very stiffly...she pours a half tumbler of whisky and tosses it down." The connotations of the adjective 'stiffly' implies that Blanche is immobilised by fear, a sympathetic trait the audience would recognise as a result of her unfamiliar surroundings. On the other hand, given her prior representation of the remnants of the aristocratic south, an audience may recognise her stiffness as contempt as disgust. During Williams' lifetime, many contemporary American writers commented on the loss of the romanticism and 'magic' of the south which occurred as a result of the economic hardship that befell the southern states after the civil war (1861-1865). Williams' himself translated this loss through his various protagonists as a loss of the sensitive, artist-type

personas that are often misunderstood and trampled one by the new, burgeoning, industrial post-war America. In *Streetcar*, this trampling of the old south magic is represented aptly by Stanley's victory over Blanche. Thus, Blanche's first encounters with the new society may incur sympathy from both modern and contemporary audiences.

However, Blanche's apparent craving for alcohol at the beginning of Scene 1 is contradicted soon after by her speech: she responds "No, I – rarely touch it" following being offered the same tumbler by Stanley. Here, the audience witness Blanche's established façade, represented masterfully through the juxtaposition of her stage directions against her direct rhetoric. This could almost be represented idiomatically: "Actions speak louder than words." Initially, however, an audience may not sympathise with her deceit, for lack of understanding – the same lack of understanding Williams' identifies between the old and new societies. As the play progresses, Blanche's façade becomes more elaborate and deserving of sympathy. This façade culminates through frequent, figurative references to Blanche's intentions: In Scene 5, she laments to Stella about her reasoning for her past actions, and arguably her latest interactions with Mitch: 'Have got to be seductive – put on soft colours, the colours of butterfly wings, and glow - make a little – temporary magic.' The broken syntax through her repeated hyphens represent her tenacity in revealing her innermost thoughts, despite the understanding of Stella. On a side note, one may argue that her belief in the need for her façade contributed to her downfall more than the façade itself. Her rhetoric here, figurative and lyrical, befits her cultural knowledge as an English teacher but also highlights some of Williams key symbolism. In the opening stage directions, Williams used the stage directions 'like a myth' to describe her. The inclusion of the noun 'butterfly' instead highlights Blanche's self-awareness to beautify herself, to change, slightly, in order to befit her intentions. Her explanation here may not, yet, be deserving of sympathy as she doesn't justify it. However, her reference to 'magic' returns in Scene 9, when confronted with Mitch, she exclaims tragically 'I don't' want realism...I want magic!' The fragmented sentence isolating 'magic' acknowledges that although she intends to deceive, her motives are inherently good. A contemporary audience, having survived the horrors of the world wars (interestingly barely mentioned in the play) would sympathise with Blanche's perhaps naïve attempt at escaping reality. Not only does this exploration justify the sympathy her creation of her façade deserves, but also undermines any animosity one may have sensed through her deceit. We can justify Blanche's attribution as a tragic heroine, given that, she is both 'essentially good' and 'evoke[s] pity' among the audience.

One of the remaining key elements of a Greek tragedy is the nature of the protagonist's downfall – was it her fault? It could be argued that the *peripeteia* (tragic recognition or insight which marks the change from a stable position to a vulnerable one) takes place in Scene 7. Stanley completely destroys Blanche's character by revealing the truth of her past to Stella and Mitch. Undermining her façade whilst Blanche 'frolics' in the bathtub, continuing her motif of cleansing her sins. This scene marks what could be considered Act two of the play – scenes 1-6 take place in May, with Scenes 7-10 making a temporal shift to September before concluding on a day some weeks later. Thus, Stanley's destruction of Blanche is clearly premeditated, as it has taken several months to amalgamate before the reveal. One could argue, then, that Blanche's tragic downfall was not her fault as it was isolated to an external influence out of her control. However, this does not negate any

sympathy we have for Blanche as the juxtaposition between Stanley's scathing, long chunks of commentary punctuated by Blanche's interjections of song presents a very tragic scene.

A traditional Greek tragedy would conclude with the utter annihilation of a character, usually through death. However, Blanche's character has experienced many journeys throughout the play, with her journey through life symbolically represented by an early line: 'They told me to take a streetcar named desire, then change to one called cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at – Elysian fields.' Her 'desire' for Allan, the schoolboy and her prostitution began her journey, whilst the death of Belle Reve and her family members resulted in her arrival at Elysian Fields. Elysian Fields was meant to be a temporary waiting place for the dead before their journey back to life, implying Blanche's journey does not end here. In addition, her final line of 'I have always depended on the kindness of strangers' echoes the desire for 'intimacies with strangers' implying her journey has started anew. Therefore, Blanche's story does not befit the predisposed sympathy of a Greek tragedy, however her pathos-worthy movements still makes her deserving of an audience's sympathy.