

**6ET04 A LEVEL ENGLISH  
LITERATURE COURSEWORK**

**FOLDER FOUR**

A CONSIDERATION OF THE WAYS IN WHICH THREE AUTHORS PRESENT AND DEVELOP THE FALL OF WOMEN: SYLVIA PLATH IN *THE BELLJAR*; SHAKESPEARE IN *OTHELLO* AND TENNESSEE WILLIAMS IN *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*.

The central female characters in *The Bell Jar*, *Othello* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* are of different historical, social and economic backgrounds. Plath wrote *The Bell Jar* during the 1950s paralleling her life and experience during her first mental breakdown and is the only one of my chosen texts to be actually written by a woman. *Othello* and *Streetcar* on the other hand show a man's perspective of women and how they see them in society; Esther is a presentation of how a woman sees herself. Esther, Blanche and Desdemona experience pressure from society's conventions, especially concerning marriage and financial independence. In some ways it could be argued that the form of *The Bell Jar*, part autobiographical memoir, part novel, with its first person narrator, gives more opportunity than drama to analyse the fall of the central character as we see Esther's downfall uniquely and directly through Esther's eyes, whereas Shakespeare presents a multi-faceted Desdemona through the perceptions of Othello, Cassio, Iago and Emilia. We as an audience are never quite certain what to make of her – is she proof of the loyalty of true love, or a passive victim? With Blanche the picture is even more complex: is she an innocent, out of her depth in a changing world, an unscrupulous "user" or, even, a whore? ✓

A04  
clear  
context  
points

A03 – open to  
interpret

Good.

Men dominate Desdemona's world, a reflection of the male controlled economy and patriarchal society that Shakespeare presents in Renaissance Venice. Her father keeps her close. On learning of her elopement he states:  
"... how got she out?"<sup>1</sup>

more context  
A04

suggesting she is an escaped prisoner. It could be interpreted that Othello too sees her as a possession, albeit a precious, incorrectly valued one. He likens her to a pearl, that he, the base Judean, threw away, at the end of the play. He admits he had not valued her; but there is no doubting his ownership. However, unlike her father, Othello allows her freedom of thought. Her father accuses her of being bewitched; whereas Othello allows her to speak at the Sagittary and she chooses to accompany him to Cyprus. Othello's extreme possessiveness however occurs, as did Brabantio's, when he thinks he has lost her.

Lack of financial independence recurs throughout the texts and influences the women's decline. In contrast to Desdemona, Stella in *A Streetcar named Desire* earns her own living, "The best I could do was make my own living,"<sup>2</sup>

On marriage, she gives up work, following the social conventions of the late 1940s. She has to ask for money:

Stella has no financial independence but it could be argued that she has achieved independence from her former life. Unlike Blanche, she is not caught in the past, a has-been socialite in a fading world. Perhaps she chose dependence on Stanley to escape her old life. Dependency is a position shared by Desdemona.

"could be  
argued"  
- A03

472 words

<sup>1</sup> Act 1, Sc1 line 167 *Othello*

<sup>2</sup> Sc 1 pg 11 *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Brabantio refers to Othello as a "thief" accusing him of stealing his daughter; Desdemona seems to be a possession until she chooses Othello.

Blanche, who has worked, has never wanted independence and when she loses her job sees marriage as her only hope. She tells Mitch:

"There was nowhere else I could go. I was played out... I needed somebody..."<sup>3</sup>

The sentence "I was played out" echoes the poker game of scene 2, and suggests Blanche views life as a game. Mitch becomes security, the prize to be won. Stella is the antithesis of Blanche; whilst Blanche is lost in her own version of reality, Stella is practical with the security Blanche desires. However, Stella too may have lost touch with reality. Her relationship with Stanley is not based on mutual respect; Stanley uses physical abuse to reassert his authority, and Stella's response is to offer forgiveness and accuse Blanche of "making too much of a fuss". She cannot see the problems in her relationship – she is lying to herself just as much as Blanche. Blanche's demise may be the tragedy of *A Streetcar named Desire* but it could be argued that Stella has the greater fall; she is trapped in a marriage with a man who has raped her sister, and lied about it. She chooses to believe him, not Blanche. Stella has succumbed to the values of male dominated society. Blanche, although incarcerated in an asylum, has escaped the situation. Stella is still trapped. As a result the play's ending is open to interpretation: who is to be pitied the most? Who is the most tragic victim? For Blanche there is always "the kindness of strangers" and the escape of madness. Stella must live with the reality of what she has done.

appropriate  
use of text  
+ comment  
to 2

✓ A03 -  
interpret!

Esther contrastingly achieves financial independence. Plath's character has no need for marriage and a male keeper. Plath reinforces this throughout; Esther's father is dead, and her brother absent; she is supported by her independent mother. Unlike Desdemona and Blanche, she has no need to marry for financial security. The novel shows the first generation of successful, independent women, yet, perhaps today its introspective writing seems all too familiar.

Contrasts  
texts

Marriage is a factor in the women's decline in all three texts. *Othello* opens with a wedding. Unlike women in the 1950s, Esther can envision a future without the security of marriage. However, for Blanche marriage becomes essential for security and protection. She says in her final confrontation with Mitch:

more  
context  
A04

"I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection..."<sup>4</sup> and asks:  
"Then marry me Mitch!"<sup>5</sup>

The suggestion that panic drives her towards security reflects the helplessness of women in this period to be independent and reinforces Blanche's isolation. Admitting her weakness creates sympathy.

936 words

<sup>3</sup> Sc 9 pg 73 *A Streetcar Named Desire*

<sup>4</sup> Sc 9 pg 73 *A Streetcar Named Desire*

<sup>5</sup> Sc 9 pg 75 *A Streetcar Named Desire*

However, Blanche's conclusion that marriage equals security is not necessarily accurate; her first marriage to Alan resulted in her later mental and financial state. Marriage has been the opposite of security.

This desired security is Mitch, a dull character, described as acting "with awkward courtesy"<sup>6</sup>. Blanche tries to build him into a protector, calling him "My Rosenkavalier". Williams portrays him as too prosaic "Can I - uh - kiss you - good night?"<sup>7</sup> and when Mitch attempts to rape Blanche, the chivalric image ends altogether. He "rises and follows her purposefully .... Fumbling to embrace her...."<sup>8</sup> He has become forceful and Blanche has created someone that never was, and perhaps the same is true of her marriage to Alan. Blanche creates images. Maybe Desdemona also sees marriage as an escape but her aims are different. She has security with her father and her love for Othello allows her to explore a new and exciting existence; exactly what Blanche tries to build in Mitch. Brabantio's fury at her elopement may be more for the loss of Desdemona than dislike of Othello (it was he who "loved [Othello]" and "oft invited [Othello]"<sup>9</sup>). It could indicate a protectiveness that is oppressive - for example, he is entirely dismissive of Roderigo's suit.

Open to interpret  
A03.

Unlike Esther or Blanche, Desdemona's fall, or death, is caused primarily from her love for Othello, highlighted in her first few speeches:

"That I did love the Moor .... And to his honours and his valiant parts  
Did my soul and fortunes consecrate..."<sup>10</sup>

Compares  
texts A03.

"Soul and fortunes consecrate" suggests Desdemona submits herself to Othello, trusting him to a degree of religious devotion. This is reinforced by the fact that it is Othello who kills her. Desdemona's trust appears unfounded; she knows little of Othello as a real person, responding to the image he presents of himself. However, it is easy to see why she does this. Othello is the antithesis of everything in her life. This is illustrated by the rhythm and lyricism of his language

"....'twas strange. 'twas passing strange,  
'Twas pitiful. 'twas wondrous pitiful"<sup>11</sup>

A02 - explores  
language

The repetition sounds like an incantation, fitting with Brabantio's accusations of bewitching. However, it also draws attention to the fact that Othello egotistically believes Desdemona loves him mainly because she pities him; in doing so it could be argued he is misunderstanding her, and himself. It is important for us, as the audience, not to be seduced by this language, beautiful and compelling though it is. If he fell in love with her because she pitied him, there is no suggestion that this was Desdemona's motivation.

There are problems of interpretation too with the level of submission Desdemona shows to Othello in the murder scene - it is difficult for a modern post feminist audience to accept. One way round this is to acknowledge that Desdemona puts her love for Othello above her sense of self preservation and that therefore Shakespeare focuses the play on love, and heightens the tragedy. The final turn of the screw comes when Desdemona (unconvincingly) makes a brief recovery from strangulation to declare she smothered herself. Again this is a moment that an audience can find difficult to accept, for practical as well as other reasons.

1366 words  
aware  
of  
audience

<sup>6</sup> Scene 3, pg 26 A Streetcar Named Desire  
<sup>7</sup> Scene 6 pg 51 A Streetcar Named Desire  
<sup>8</sup> Sc 9 stage directions pp 74-75 A Streetcar Named Desire  
<sup>9</sup> Act 1 Sc 3 line 129 Othello  
<sup>10</sup> Act 1 Sc 3 lines 248 - 255 Othello  
<sup>11</sup> Act 1 Sc 3 lines 161-2 Othello

Perhaps Shakespeare is showing the final act of selfless love. This is not the "fall" of a heroine, but her rise to selflessness. Cordelia is therefore a Christ like figure, the epitome of goodness. There is a great danger here, however, of turning a vibrant flesh and blood character into an emblem of goodness (as Bradley attempted to do with Cordelia in *King Lear*). She is in fact much more solid and realistic than this.

"perhaps" -  
open to  
interpret.  
A03.

In contrast to Blanche and Desdemona, Esther rejects Buddy Willard explaining "I'm never going to get married."<sup>12</sup>

She wants independence and success. The successful women she meets are all unmarried; such as editor Jay Cee. Plath perhaps suggests that sacrificing family life remains the only way for a woman to become successful. One poet even says to her at the mention of being married

"... what about your career?"

In the 1950s, women made a choice between independence and family life. Yet there is a level of independence that would have been unthinkable in Blanche's world of the 1940s. Marriage becomes a lesser contributing factor to Esther's fall. Her life does not revolve around men and marriage, and she resists any attempts to make it so, which makes her an easier character to identify with as a modern woman. Her fall stems mainly from her potential; she does not know what to do with her talents.

Context  
A04  
appropriately  
handled.

The familiar society and surroundings of the women contribute to their falls; they are introduced to new places and societies. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* Blanche, from an old, formerly wealthy southern family, is plunged into the world of New Orleans and a neighbourhood ironically called Elysian Fields. Ironic, because life is lived to the full by most of the inhabitants, but destroys Blanche. She is confined to one house and street. On first arriving in New Orleans and Stella's flat she states:

"Why didn't you tell me ... that you had to live in these conditions!"<sup>13</sup>

This exists in strong contrast with Belle Reve, which is described as "A great big place with white columns".<sup>14</sup>

The two settings act as a metaphor for the dramatic change of social station Blanche experiences; her old life of glitz and glamour, to the rough and ready world of New Orleans. However, materialism has not brought her happiness in the past. Stella is superficially happier than Blanche. Williams keeps the action within the single flat of Stella and Stanley. This flat represents the whole world, one in which Blanche is effectively trapped. Desdemona is also trapped within a small fixed space.

A02 - use of  
metaphor

1902 words

<sup>12</sup> Chapter 8 pg 89 *The Bell Jar*

<sup>13</sup> Sc 1 pg A *A Streetcar Named Desire*

<sup>14</sup> Sc 1 pg 6

Shakespeare moves the action from Venice to Cyprus, an island. Plath too uses place symbolically; Esther is trapped in increasingly small spaces as the novel progresses. The writers use the compression of space to rein force the sense of entrapment.

Time is also important; *Othello* takes place over a period of three days, not allowing any room for Desdemona's alleged adultery. This condensing of events echoes the way in which place is condensed; there is not enough room in either location or time for what is alleged to occur. The condensed time scale highlights *Othello*'s tragedy by proving to the audience that Iago's claims are untrue, and it also suggests the speed of Desdemona and *Othello*'s relationship: they elope, and then only have "but an hour of love."<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, both *The Bell Jar* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* show longer periods of time. The novel form allows time in *The Bell Jar* to be especially fluid; past events are reported in detail alongside description of the present. This lack of discipline reflects Esther's mind; as her mental state deteriorates, so does the timescale. The truth of the past is also revealed slowly in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Williams highlights the merging of the past and the present through Blanche; she exists in the present yet is caught in the past both socially and mentally. However, Williams may only present the past through Blanche's words. This gives the audience a sense that all may not be as it seems, given that Blanche tells "... what ought to be the truth"<sup>16</sup> and not the truth itself.

Plath presents Esther's entrapment through the symbolism of the bell jar: "The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air."<sup>17</sup>

Esther is shut off from reality by a glass barrier; she can see the world, but cannot interact with it. A vacuum is created, suffocating anything living within it, reinforcing the feeling of suffocation and isolation. Although this barrier is removed finally, Plath reminds us that the bell jar remains; it is only "suspended" not removed. Thus Plath creates a sense of tension; the bell jar may fall again.

Williams also constructs metaphor. A polka recurs affecting Blanche and signifying her past. It is significant that it always ends with a shot:

"There now, the shot! It always stops after that!"<sup>18</sup>

Blanche is trapped by Alan's suicide and Williams subtly uses music to remind the audience of her sadness. Blanche is haunted by the past but is afraid of the future and the passage of time. She is never seen in strong light until the final confrontation with Mitch, which climaxes with the revelation of unpleasant truth. Whether it was right or wrong for Blanche to hide her true age from Mitch, it is, on one level, understandable. She comes from a world where appearance and looks are everything. The audience is encouraged to judge Blanche as Mitch does, but perhaps it is Mitch who should be judged? Although he claims not to care about her real age, he clearly cares about what her looks reveal. Is it her appearance or her actions that make him class her as a whore? If Esther is trapped by the future, Blanche is trapped by the past.

Desdemona rejects social conventions, as she crosses barriers to *Othello*.

2462 words

<sup>15</sup> Act 1 Sc 3 lines 300 – 1 *Othello*

<sup>16</sup> Scene 9 pg 73 *A Streetcar Named Desire*

<sup>17</sup> Chapter 18 pg 206 *The Bell jar*

<sup>18</sup> Sc 9, pg 71 *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Considerations

of genre - A02.

more

on metaphor A02.

"That I did love the Moor to live with him  
My downright violence and scorn of fortunes  
May trumpet to the world."<sup>19</sup>

Shakespeare uses powerful, forthright language such as "violence" and "scorn" to emphasise <sup>A02</sup> how she sees social convention as no infringement on her free will. In contrast, Blanche and <sup>1818</sup> Esther allow social conventions to hem them in. Desdemona is the only one with enough strength of character to refuse to abide by social <sup>at language.</sup> conventions, which were particularly stringent for women of her time. Esther and Blanche, who historically have more freedom, are unwilling to exercise it. The most distressing part of Esther's fall is that she has a chance of true independence. Both Esther and Blanche crumble when subjected to the pressures of society; Desdemona grows stronger. Her true tragedy, her death, wastes the fact that she embraces love and rejects society.

Only Esther moves on with a fresh start. We do not know Blanche's future. Of course, if we take *The Bell Jar* to be autobiographical, then we know that the story does not end happily. Plath committed suicide after suffering further bouts of depression, just after the publication of *The Bell Jar*. She, like Desdemona, was ultimately unable to recover from her fall from normality.

2670 words

A01 : 20/20  
A02 : 20/20  
A03 : 17/20  
A04 : 19/20  
TOTAL 76/80

<sup>19</sup> Sc 3

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