

---

## A comparison into the themes of reputation and chastity in A streetcar Named Desire and The Duchess of Malfi

In Webster's Jacobean revenge tragedy *The Duchess of Malfi*, and Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, written in 1947, both men consider the themes of chastity and the effect chastity has on the main female characters' reputation within society. Both are widows, but Blanche is desperate to remarry after fleeing her reputation of promiscuity, while the Duchess is unashamed of her sexuality and marries a man below her social status secretly, against the wishes of her brothers. Blanche is greatly concerned with appearing pure, while the Duchess is more concerned with her own happiness and power.

Both plays were written at times of a Patriarchal society, so a woman's chastity was key in determining society's outlook on her, which Williams and Webster investigate. Webster explores the value of chastity through the brothers' control of the Duchess, for example their attempt to arrange a marriage between her and Malateste. 'Malateste' means 'bad testes', which, combined with the mocking of his masculinity in Act 3, Scene 3, for example 'He has worn gunpowder in's hollow tooth, // For the tooth-ache.' It can be believed that Ferdinand wants the Duchess to marry a relatively weak man who couldn't control her, so that position would be left to him; alternatively, this paired with Ferdinand's allusions to incestuous feelings towards the Duchess may suggest that he hopes that Malateste will not have sex with the Duchess, and her chastity will remain as it is. Webster also demonstrates Ferdinand's resistance against the Duchess' sexuality in Act 1, Scene 1, when he responds with 'Whores, by that rule, are precious' to a progressive statement on female sexuality made by the Duchess. This shows the strength of how much Ferdinand values the Duchess' chastity, as he shuns her for even considering the notion. Webster also shows the effect the Duchess' lack of chastity has on her fate in her death scene - just before she is strangled, the executioner says 'Here's your wedding ring' as he shows her the noose. Webster is essentially revealing that the Duchess' marriage is what will kill her - her marriage went against the wishes of her brothers, who wanted her to remain a widow, and her disobedience has ultimately led to her death. This was potentially foreshadowed by Ferdinand threatening her with a poniard in Act 1, Scene 1 and Act 3, Scene 2, when her sexuality and marriage is being discussed. Webster explores the societal value on chastity through the unhealthy desire of the Duchess' brothers (mainly Ferdinand) to control it. This can be challenged by the critic Christopher Hart, who wrote that 'The two brothers are not driven by any sense of possessive outrage, however warped, but by a delight in malice itself, a "motiveless malignity" even against their own flesh and blood,' suggesting that the brothers were controlling for the sake of being controlling, rather than ulterior motives, although the Ferdinand's actions disprove this.

---

### Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

---

Williams also explores the value society placed on chastity through the male characters' treatment of Blanche after finding out about her past promiscuity. Mitch's shock, shown by Stanley telling Stella that Mitch thought Blanche 'had never been more than kissed by a fellow' in Scene 7, shows the value of chastity, as Mitch has expected purity and chastity from Blanche, despite her past marriage. Mitch's shock eventually develops into rage and disgust, as in Scene 9, he tells Blanche 'you're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother.' This suggests that Mitch doesn't actually care about her past and what reputation she has, but that she is no longer pure to him, which fuels his rage and belief that he can use her for sex, shown by his attempted rape of Blanche. This mirrors the Patriarchal society, which retained traditional values that placed women on a moral pedestal above men, resulting in double standards that expected women to remain pure, while male promiscuity was accepted. Simone de Beauvoir's book 'The Second Sex' explores the idea that women are second to men, which matches the ideas and expectations of each gender in a Patriarchal society. Williams has Stanley use mocking names for Blanche, such as 'Sister Blanche,' ironically comparing her to celibate nuns, and saying that she is 'no lily.' The metaphor of a lily evokes an image of purity, as white connotes virginity - which Blanche no longer has, but the reproductive organ of a lily stains anything it touches, which mimics how Blanche's sexuality has tarnished society's view of her, which suggests that she is like a lily. Finally, like how Webster suggests that the Duchess' marriage led to her death, Williams does the same through Blanche's journey to Stella and Stanley's apartment. First she takes the streetcar named 'Desire', then one called 'Cemetaries', getting off at 'Elysian Fields.' This physical journey is a metaphor for Blanche's demise, as her sexual desire led her to her death, and the Elysian Fields was the afterlife in Greek mythology. Both Williams and Webster explore the dangerous levels of value placed on chastity through their cautionary tales.

Webster and Williams also consider how important a good reputation was in society at the times both plays were written. Blanche's desperation to keep a good reputation and hide her bad reputation due to fear of being a societal outcast is evident in her avoidance of light, which Williams used as a symbol of the truth. Williams writes in the stage directions that when Mitch rips the lantern off the light bulb in Scene 9, Blanche 'utters a frightened gasp.' Her fear demonstrates the importance of reputation, as she is scared of the consequences now Mitch has literally been enlightened on the truth of her past and subsequent reputation. When Stanley tells Stella of Blanche's past, he says that 'she is as famous in Laurel as if she was the President of the United States, only she is not respected by any party!' The likening of Blanche's infamy to that of a politician, only Blanche has a lack of respect, suggesting that politicians are immune to disrespect can be linked to Webster, as the Duchess' reputation culminates in her office being taken away from her, as the Pope had heard of her 'looseness.'

Webster also looks at the effect of reputation being important had on male characters, and not just sexual reputation - the Cardinal murders Julia because he 'knew thou couldst not keep my

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**

---

counsel.' Webster is suggesting that he fears that Julia exposing him for his role in the murder of the Duchess, possibly as well as his affair with a married woman, will harm his reputation as a man of the church. In Jacobean theater, corruption in the Catholic church was a common feature, as it was an easy target for the anticlericalism in Protestant England. This is redundant, as the brothers already have a bad reputation for corruption, shown by how Webster's metaphor of a plum tree in Act 1, Scene 1, where Antonio says that they are 'rich and overladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies and caterpillars feed on them,' implying that they are extremely powerful but surround themselves with a bad crowd.

Blanche and the Duchess are presented as unbothered by their own chastity, but Blanche is definitely more concerned with her reputation than the Duchess. The Duchess keeps her relationship secret, but is she just concerned about the reaction it will get, saying she is 'going into a wilderness.' She is most likely worried due to her brothers' expectations and attempts to control her chastity, which is proven to be a rational fear when Ferdinand tells her 'for thine own sake // Let me not know thee,' warning the Duchess not to reveal the father of her children's identity for his safety. The only person who initially knows of the marriage and identity is Cariola, which suggests that the Duchess trusts the woman, as women could be more sympathetic about female sexuality, which can be demonstrated by Cariola saying she 'owes her much pity' for the conflict between the Duchess as a woman and the Duchess as the Duchess of Malfi. The Duchess' almost-pride in her sexuality and lack of shame can be seen when she says to Ferdinand, 'why should only I // Of all the other princes of the world // Be cased up like a holy relic?' showing her frustration at the double-standards that society had about male and female sexuality. The comparison of the Duchess to male princes can be interpreted as complimentary, and Webster demonstrating her strength, but feminist-readers may question why a female character could not be viewed as strong as a female holding political office.

Blanche is desperate to marry anyone so she can seem respectable - looking for affection from anyone, not bothered with who, just that she'll get it. Her concern for her reputation is evident when she says to Stella, 'You haven't heard any - unkind - gossip about me?' the break that separates and emphasizes 'unkind' shows her to be tentative, implying that she is so concerned about her reputation that she doesn't even want her sister to know about it and the reasons for it. Blanche tells Stanley she was born under Virgo - 'the virgin', which is a clear, explicit example of how she wants people to think of her as virginal. Some of Blanche's difficulties can be traced to the narrow roles open to females during that period. The 20th century critic Lynn Spampinato says that 'although she is an educated woman who has worked as a teacher, Blanche is nonetheless constrained by the expectations of Southern society. She knows that she needs men to lean on and to protect her,' which explains the causes for her behavior. She wears a 'white suit' with 'white gloves and hat', which corroborates the view that she tries to present herself as pure, as white has connotations of chastity and virginity. Her

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**

---

'fluffy bodice' appears like angel wings, also contributing to her presentation of herself as pure. Williams compares Blanche to a 'moth', which dislike and are confused by light, which leads to their demise (often death), which is a symbol of how the light, which is a symbol of the truth ultimately leads to Blanche's demise.

Both Webster and Williams consider the importance of chastity and the effect it has on reputation, both women seem to be unconcerned with their chastity, while male characters tend to react negatively to their lack of chastity, most likely influenced by society's approaches to women, however Webster presents reputation as more important as male characters were concerned with their reputation, not just female characters.

gradesfixer.com

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)