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## Comparison Of The Presentation Of Female Characters In 'A Streetcar Named Desire' And 'The Catcher In The Rye'

The presentation of female characters varies throughout American literature due to influential events such as Feminism, the First World War as well as the Second World War; however, what slightly hindered these potentially great changes was a patriarchal society which still oppressed women. Both of the World Wars would have a significant effect on the writers, J.D. Salinger and Tennessee Williams as this had brought about a change in people's perception, to the belief of the potential prosperity in the face of misfortune which can be seen in the American Dream's values. In James Truslow Adams' book, *The Epic of America*, written in 1931, Adams stated that the American dream is a 'dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. ... but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.' (p.214-215) As the American Dream had become a more prominent goal after the two wars and great depression, opportunities were increasing as the industry sky-rocketed and more goods were being produced, for example farm output went from an index (by volume) of 106 in 1939 to 128 in 1943 and continued steadily. During this time America had experienced rapid economic growth and the people enjoyed the prosperity of this time period giving them hopes in achieving the American Dream which is reflective in other literary texts such as 'The Great Gatsby' where Gatsby represents the American Dream as he came from 'nothing' into acquiring wealth, power, and status as well as the symbolism of Daisy's East Egg dock having a green light, which represents Gatsby's hopes and dreams of wealth, which is ironic as he does not understand how money actually works in the American life, similar to Stanley in that he wishes to be wealthy yet is unaware of wealth as examined through his impulsive ideas of Blanche's 'pearls'. Blanche, in Williams play, was a working woman as she had been a teacher but because her partner was gay and committed suicide, social stigma led to Blanche feeling the need to leave her hometown and due to patriarchy dictating she needs a man to live a 'normal' life and be accepted justifies her desire for a male companion. Due to feminist movements, women were beginning to gain a voice and exercised it in different forms and because of this, while men were away at war, women took the opportunity and ran part of the work force and even after men came back there was still a small fraction of women working. In Salinger's novel, the females Holden interacts with appear to be going places or doing something presenting their freedom of their newly liberated life as in comparison to before the war; however, there is no direct talk of these females' work or what they do. More predominantly in 'The Catcher in the Rye' a modern reader can see that life after the war was beginning to unfold and women began to start careers and socialise as the reader sees that women go to dances, parties and watch Broadway shows. Whereas, in 'A Streetcar Named Desire' the characters like Stella appear to be constrained as a stay-at-home wife and Blanche does go out but only when she was with a man like Mitch and Alan still displaying this patriarchal society and the contemporaneous societal view that men dictate a woman's life.

Williams' play and Salinger's novel are written eight years apart in the 1940s, and it is clear that societies perception of females changes; these texts reflect American society as well as Salinger and Williams' views of women. These texts are written by males, meaning that the

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recipient would only view the female characters through the lens of a man. Considering the contemporary hegemonic force of men that were dictating laws, Catharine A. MacKinnon states "the way the male point of view frames an experience is the way it is framed by state policy.", meaning that the reader or audience can only see women as what they have been defined by through law, of which men were closely related to. Stanley displays this hegemonic force when he "gives a loud whack of his hand" on Stella's thigh. It is evident that Stanley acts as though he owns his wife through the sexually possessive action of striking her thigh, treating her the way he wants to. Male dominance is reinforced by Stella's futile response when she responds "[sharply] That's not fun, Stanley", the laughter of the other men at the table highlights the passive role of women in the play and in thus society. Women in Williams' play appear to be held down by men who continually oppress them and as men were in-charge of companies they would not typically give a woman a job due the patriarchal stereotype of women being a weaker sex, resulting in them to fulfil the roles as either a wife, mother or both while the man is the breadwinner. This contradicts the notion Adams states about men and women being 'able to attain to the fullest stature...regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position', as it is because of patriarchy that the true extent of the American Dream in 'Streetcar' can never be accomplished. Unlike Salinger's novel where the females appear more liberated and freer in enjoying life going to parties and Broadway shows. However, it can be argued that as they do either go with a man or intend to leave with one as proven by the three women: Bernice, Marty and Laverne who 'kept looking all around the goddam room', displays that the male influence was still prevalent in society as a whole, giving the impression that these women are going out to in search of happiness, from a man, just like Blanche intended to 'fill my[her] empty heart'. As Holden looks back retrospectively, the reader then views and moulds: events, characters and settings from what we perceive through Holden, thus we question the reliability of this recount as there may be a bias to the "male point of view" meaning we cannot fully trust what Holden says completely as he is still not able to analyse his own mind very well. This calls into question reliability of the narrator as the reader ponders how valid his statements are when he cannot make simple judgments about himself, much less others. In the novel's last paragraph, Holden says: 'About all I know is, I sort of miss everybody I told about.' The fact that he has, to some extent, changed his mind about people who affected him so negatively casts doubt on his original judgments about them. Thus, we consider the likelihood that Holden's feelings toward these characters were strongly influenced by his own state of mind, which we now have reason to question displaying the power society has on its people. Contrary to Williams' play, which does not have one particular perspective; the audience instead have an omniscient third person perspective which suggests that the audience is free to think what they will of the characters as the audience sees the characters for who they actually are by actions but we are unable to fully examine the character's inner thoughts like we can with the protagonist of Holden. By Williams allowing us to have this free will of interpretation reinforces the realism and could possibly be argued as a more reliable source in terms of society's perspective of women which could be through the "framed" angle MacKinnon suggests.

In Salinger's novel, Holden appears to have gentle and caring nature contradicting the harsh and opinionated views he gives about the other characters in the novel. Phoebe is someone who Holden knows he can confide himself in and is his emotional anchor and who is ironically more mature than Holden. Whereas Jane Gallagher is someone whom Holden very much cares about yet denies having any intimate relationship or feelings with. Both of the characters-Jane and Phoebe are people Holden idealises very much and cares for.

Towards the end of the novel Holden compassionately refers to his sister as 'old Phoebe' and it

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is clear from this affectionate tone he cares about her. Holden is protective of Phoebe's innocence as he sees himself in her from a time not too long ago. As growing up for Holden has required him to recognise the world around him for what it really is and not the artificial way, he believes he was raised (i.e through movies) the constant use of the word "phonies" refers that world and the new one in which he is far too uncomfortable which has left him to feel isolated and cynical about the future. Holden views Phoebe as a person untainted by the harsh reality of life. He assumes that if he can spare his sister the pain in which he now finds himself, and "catch" her before she falls into the rye, then he will have accomplished something important and greater than himself. This is the only presentation of Holden as a contemporaneous protective caring man and brother and even then, his ideals are something he has no control over and it is Phoebe that is able to help him, unknowingly, discover that adulthood isn't as bad. As Holden misquotes a poem by Robert Burns- 'Comin' Thro' the Rye' thinking: 'If a body catch a body comin' through the rye' Holden says what he wants to be "the catcher in the rye" and he thinks he is responsible for "catching" children in the field before they "start to go over the cliff." The fantastic field Holden envisions is free of adult ideas and artificiality from his initial perceived world. The field Holden imagines is reminiscent of Peter Pan's Neverland or the Garden of Eden, of which, both are realms that protect innocence from the corrupting influence of experience and life. The fall from the cliff represents the "fall" into adulthood that is symbolic of: lust, greed, ambition, and "phoniness." The language calls to mind the Biblical fall of Adam and Eve, who were exiled from the Garden of Eden after their awakening to sin and there is shame of sexuality which is a shame that Holden also feels. A typical male would want a woman to stay young in the aspect of beauty as like age, for Holden, it disappears but Holden defies this logic and instead wishes to freeze time so Phoebe can maintain her youth and innocence like in the History museum, this is one of ways Holden attempts to care and protect his sister from the world. Jane never actually appears in the novel, but Holden frequently thinks about her. She seems to be the one person - of his own age whom he genuinely likes. He remembers her as a quiet and caring kind of person, who has also suffered from a 'lousy childhood' which is one of the things that probably makes him more protective of her as demonstrated by him physically attacking Stradlater after he was on a date with her. Holden is appalled at the very thought of Stradlater being with her, but we cannot be entirely sure if Stradlater is really as immoral as he fears or whether his overreaction is more indicative of his own desire for her, which he doesn't seem to want to think about too much. Holden, regards Jane as a close friend and is arguably deeply attracted to her. Holden can never bring himself to phone her, as this may be because she functions as an idealised female figure for him to some extent, and he can't cope with actually meeting her which Lingdi Chen supports stating that Holden 'longs for the meaningful connection he once had with Jane Gallagher, but he is too frightened to make any real effort to contact her.' Jane is not ideal as Holden makes her to be as he recalls Jane once dating Al Pike, 'a terrible guy', 'a show-off bastard' and sticking up for him stating 'She acted like she felt sorry for him ... She meant it.' Holden seems astounded that 'even smart girls' like Jane inaccurately judge conceited guys like Al Pike unlike Phoebe who doesn't judge at all and 'sits and listens'. Perhaps Holden is saying that Jane doesn't appreciate him quite as much as she ought to, and that is why he puts off meeting up with her throughout the novel.

In Williams' play, Stanley appears to fulfil the ideology of the stereotypical male role as he is the breadwinner, strong and shows no signs of weakness physically. The sisters Blanche and Stella have conforming and subverting characteristics to the contemporaneous American society. Blanche is almost a typical woman who embodies the contemporaneous female who is: fragile and desires magic instead of reality. Whilst Stella on the other hand is more resilient, caring, who deals with two conflicting worlds of her sister Blanche and husband Stanley, both of

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which are trying to sue her to their side. Stella isn't as womanish as she appears, because like a female of 1940s America she is emotionally soft as displayed by her being easily forgiving as after her quarrel with Stanley at the 'Poker Night' she is given "ten dollars to smooth things over". Despite Stella being aware of Stanley's abusive actions, she acts if nothing is wrong. She denies the notion that they have a frequently abusive relationship to Blanche who naturally becomes concerned for her sister and tells Stella to "get us [them] both--out" while she can. Because of the night before (the Poker night), Stanley had smashed the radio but Stella mentions to Blanche that the "The radio is fixed" as "It didn't land on the pavement so only one tube was smashed". Stella's tone of voice is calm as if she is used to this happening and that the chaos the audience and Blanche first witness is part of their life/marriage, to a modern audience we are concerned for Stella's well-being physically and mentally however, taking into consideration the time period fights are common in couples so the audience contemporaneous and modern acknowledge this is still their state of equilibrium. There is symbolic relationship between the radio and Stanley and Stella's marriage. When Stanley broke the radio that acts as the pivotal point as there proceeds to be chaos within their home and then as soon as Stanley fixes the radio, everything is supposedly meant to be back to the way things were and when Blanche tells Stella that she is able to get out of this relationship, Stella refuses her suggestion by stating that she is "not in anything that I have a desire to get out of". T. Williams believes that Stella's "natural passivity is one of the things that makes her acceptance of Stanley acceptable. She naturally 'gives in', accepts, lets things slide, she does not make much of an effort'. This moment highly validates this belief as Stella remains submissive to her husband's actions and turns a blind eye as to how frequent and natural these events are. Though this could be a part of what actually occurred in the 1940s which could be what Williams is alluding to, but from a twenty-first century audience like Ben Barter, Stanley is described as "barbaric" in terms of his treatment to Stella and Blanche however, a contemporary audience would accept that Stella says she loves Stanley and is with him.

Due to his masculine and imposing presence whenever Stanley is around Stella, she cannot fully demonstrate how strong she can be due to the heavy influence of patriarchy/men. The first scene Stella wants to show that she is a strong character initially by almost ordering Stanley: "Don't holler at me like that. Hi, Mitch". There is a separation in how Stella speaks, from a commanding almost male-like tone suggesting women's transgression because of the negative and commanding imperative 'don't' ordering Stanley; Stella then switches back to the nice peaceful woman greeting Mitch. Williams desires to prove that Stella has the potential of a strong character; however, the fact that Stanley "heaves the package" of meat at her indicates Williams is demonstrating how she has no control in their relationship. She falls back into the stereotypical and approved view of women as a submissive character who always ends up following whatever (the man) Stanley wants her to do and she then chases after him on his way to the bowling alley but only after asking for permission that she may just watch. On the other hand, Amy Williams states that part of Stella's strength is from the fact that "She stays positive and constant in her pursuit of survival and her piece of the American dream." Referring back to what Stella tells Blanche: "I said I am not in anything that I have a desire to get out of." Here this presents Stella as aspiring to succeed and have a piece of the American dream as not only does she perceive her home as her castle, despite its size, she is also proud of her and Stanley's relationship and has accepted his flaws because her repeated claims of her devotion to for Stanley and the fact that he is able to provide for her. Amy Williams also states that Stella being pregnant displays her "drive to succeed and live the American dream" as the goal to have a child was part of achieving the American dream in belief of happiness. This can be analysed in terms of Darwinism and survival in that her and Stanley's genes are needed in

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order to not only preserve Stella's family line and heritage but also in hopes that this child gains their better qualities in order to be someone in society and in turn continue their legacy of sorts especially considering the examination previously that despite a male or female there will not be 'recognized by others for what they are'.

Overall, females are presented as characters that have potential inside of them but due to 1950s American patriarchal society women are to an extent inferior to men and can never be true as Rousseau states: 'Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains' as explored through characters like Stella who attempted to break her social construct but get put back in line by the imposing force of men (her husband Stanley) or Blanche who was a working woman but due to a 'many intimacies with strangers' was in fragile mental state and was needed to feel some happiness even if it were to 'fill my[her] empty heart'. But characters in *Catcher* prove to be somewhat more free as it is displayed from the events Holden goes to that women are enjoying their liberated life, post World-War for example the three ladies who were are a party displays them indulging in the delights of freedom however, they still are as dependent for a man like, Stella or Blanche, when they look around. Also, Jane Gallagher and Phoebe represent a different side for Holden as they help him understand society and though his other views of women are rude when Holden speaks about those to characters he is different which is perhaps Salinger portraying that men can change and society does not need to have such views that restrict men and women to ideals.

There is a correspondence with the theme of females either being relied on or relying on someone; overall females are presented as characters that others can console themselves with. As with Holden, Stanley also appears to have this gentle side as after his drunken outburst he dramatically reflects how his "baby doll's left me [him]!" and the stage direction of having him "breaks into sobs" add to the drama and really shows how much Stanley actually appreciates Stella and him losing her makes him truly understand her worth. This is perfectly demonstrated when Stanley and Stella are brought back together at the bottom of the stairs and they have an intimate moment. When Stella tells Blanche the day after that Stanley "was as good as a lamb when I [she] came back, and he's... ashamed of himself." The conflicting sides of Stanley as strong physically yet soft emotionally almost shows him as the female and Williams is portraying just how much of an influence woman have but also criticising the contemporary view of women proving that men can also fit into the parameter's society sets as a standard for women. Initially the audience could find it difficult to tolerate him as he hits his wife, but him recognising what he has lost or has the potential to lose makes us happy for him as this seems like a path of redemption all because of the innocence and influence of Stella. Similarly in Salinger's, *'The Catcher in the Rye'*, just the thought of Jane Gallagher consoles Holden and he is able to really appreciate her as Stanley does Stella as he "falls on his knees" and when Holden talks to and about Phoebe the reader is able to see the depth of Holden in an emotional sense as his tone as like Stanley differs and this means there is more to understand and unravel about these characters. Holden's eagerness and passion when he talks about his young sister allows the reader to see the untypical side to a contemporary male.