

Paper 2

To what extent do the two works you have studied show that an individual is in control of his or her own destiny?

Henrik Ibsen wrote *Hedda Gabler* in 1890 to shine a light on the patriarchal society of Victorian Norway, where women were denied access to inheritance, higher education, and voting. Originally written in Norwegian, the play details the way the protagonist, Hedda Gabler, becomes so overburdened by social norms that she is pushed to commit suicide. Nearly 60 years later in 1947, the American playwright Tennessee Williams wrote *A Streetcar Named Desire* to explore the decay of the once grand and extravagant American South. The play's protagonist, Blanche DuBois, is a Southern Belle who has promiscuous and pedophilic tendencies, and it is this disposition that causes her downfall and subsequent "death" in a mental asylum. Through this, Williams is able to convey to readers how a person's base nature determines her inevitable destiny. Thus, in the case of both works, it is heavily insinuated that an individual may not actually be in control of her own destiny. (156)

Through the use of setting in *Hedda Gabler*, Ibsen is able to show the audience the effects of a patriarchal society on a woman's ability to control her own destiny. The play is set in the former Prime Minister's house, which Tesman, Hedda's husband, buys in order to fulfill her material needs. However, the house itself is actually a symbol for the couple's "business transaction" marriage, as Tesman naively believes that a husband's only responsibility is to satisfy his wife's tangible needs – and it is largely because of this that Hedda finds her husband boring and contemptible. However, as women living in Victorian Norway were denied access to inheritance and paid employment in the external sphere, they were forced to marry men for the sake of survival. Therefore, Hedda and Tesman's union and marital house can also represent a prison where Hedda has no choice but to be held captive in return for financial security. Thus, Ibsen's audience can see that Hedda and her contemporaries are oppressed by the male-dominated world in which they live, and are powerless in controlling their own destiny. Instead, men like Tesman intern them as domestic prisoners. (192)

Despite this, Ibsen uses the play's resolution to show the audience that some hope exists for women who attempt to control their destiny. At the end of the play Hedda has fallen prey to Judge Brack, who uses his knowledge of Hedda's involvement in Loevborg's death to hold her captive as his sexual pawn. However, as a final attempt to liberate herself, Hedda uses one of her father's pistols to commit suicide. This act can be interpreted as a gesture of empowerment, as Hedda finally finds the courage to control her destiny, even if that destiny is death. In this case, the audience can see that Hedda actively rejects being Brack's sexual serf, and in doing so chooses a different course, thus controlling the outcome of her life – and also denying a powerful man what he believes he is entitled to. Unfortunately, Hedda's suicide can also be read as a sign of her weakness as a woman, for the success of her death relies on General Gabler's pistol, a phallic and lethal weapon that represents masculine power. In this case, the audience may see that it is actually masculine power – that is, Norway's male-dominated society – that kills Hedda; therefore, she is not at all in control of her own destiny. This interpretation is further supported by Tesman and Brack's dismissive lines upon learning of Hedda's death. The former says, "Fancy that!" and the latter says, "People don't do such things!", both of which undermine the power and awe of Hedda's suicide. The fact that the play ends with these lines suggests that in 1890s Norway, it was men who had the final word on a woman's life. (277)

Nearly 60 years after Ibsen published *Hedda Gabler*, Williams used symbolism in *A Streetcar Named Desire* to show the audience that one's destiny was not something that could be easily controlled. At the start of the play, Blanche has taken a streetcar named Desire, then transferred to another streetcar named Cemeteries, and finally alighted at Elysian Fields. In a literal sense, a streetcar is a passenger

vehicle that runs on rails following a prescribed track and therefore does not allow riders to control the direction in which the tram travels. More figuratively, Blanche's commute on a streetcar is symbolic, for it suggests that her life is being driven and directed by a force that she cannot control. By naming the first streetcar *Desire*, Williams insinuates that physical, carnal desire controls a person's nature and behavior and thus her destiny. Indeed, Blanche was once a high school English teacher in Laurel, but she was released from her job and kicked out of town after sleeping with a student and engaging in prostitution. This example of Blanche's characterization shows how she is riding on "A Streetcar Named Desire", and if the audience considers the final destination of Elysian Fields, which is an allusion to the final resting place of the dead in Greek mythology, they can see that Williams cleverly foreshadows in the first scene of the play not only the destructive power of desire but also Blanche's inexorable fate of banishment to a mental asylum where she metaphorically dies. The root cause of this doom, of course, is Blanche's carnal desire getting the best of her – a situation that mirrors Williams' life as a homosexual who struggled between his morality and his desire for other men. Ultimately, Williams pursued countless male partners throughout his life despite hating the fact that he was gay. As such, through the symbolism of the streetcar, Williams is able to warn his audience about the intoxicating and destructive power of desire as well as the inability to control one's destiny. (334)

Despite this, Williams uses characterization to depict *attempts* to control one's destiny. When Blanche arrives at the Kowalskis' home, she is dressed in delicate white clothes. As the color white is commonly associated with purity and innocence, and is typically worn by holy and unsullied figures such as Jesus and the Pope, one may see that Blanche is trying to cleanse herself of her mistakes, or at least mask her true self: a promiscuous woman. In either case, wearing white is an attempt to take control of her destiny, which is further supported by Williams' use of a bathing motif. Blanche takes many long, hot baths throughout the play in order to wash away her sinful deeds and to expunge her base nature. She also puts a paper lantern over the light bulb to diminish its glare, signifying her will to cover up the truth in favor of pretense. However, none of these tactics can truly conceal or alter Blanche's human nature because a person's inherent self cannot be masked or erased. Indeed, Stanley eventually rips the lantern off the bulb and destroys the illusions Blanche hides behind. Worse yet, Mitch discovers Blanche's real identity, which thwarts her attempt to marry him to attain a safer life and a more stable future. Thus, Williams is quite effective and successful in showing his audience the futility of trying to control one's own destiny. (232)

In conclusion, Ibsen and Williams use a variety of stylistic features in their respective works to show that an individual often is not in control of her own destiny. By presenting this idea in stage performances, they were able to create empathy and encourage identification. Indeed, Ibsen presents in *Hedda Gabler* the ideology of the Women's Movement – that is, the fight for women's rights – to foster public awareness of the weak position of women in Norway and across Europe. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams reminds his audience of the decay of the Old South following its defeat in the American Civil War, and in doing so urges them to come to terms with the infinitely more modern and cosmopolitan New America. (122)

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