A Streetcar Named Desire: Gender Stereotypes

In ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’, Stanley and Mitch represent post-war male stereotypes, socially dominant heroic characters, while women returned to their domestic roles. They are synonyms of family providers, carers and protectors. But as the title suggests, they are only passengers, driven by their sexual desires, a more egocentric/hedonist personality trait “a dominant idea of American masculinity, immediately after WWII” (Hefner, 2016, p. 3). Stanley is depicted through picturesque stage directions: “the centre of his life has been pleasure with women (…) with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens”, mutating by the end of play into a wrathful “King” who resorts to violence, a strategy perhaps influenced by Williams’ father. He was a womanising gambler, who allegedly sexually assaulted Williams’ sister. The playwright never forgave his mother for the lobotomy on Rose and “saw his sister’s problems as no more than frustrated desire” (Croft, n.d.). Mitch appears to be a more sympathetic and caring image of masculinity and may echo Williams’s own guilt for allowing this. However, he later regresses into a more stereotypical male lacking admirable qualities.

In the first scene, Stanley is pictured as an admirable, “strong”, charming man. He is a bowling “team-captain”, a leader among his male friends and in terms of social status, “a master sergeant in the Engineer’s Corps”. He is also work driven: “Stanley’s the only one of his crowd that’s likely to get anywhere” and he “owns the place”, under the President Roosevelt’s New Deal. Stanley Kowalski, from second generation Polish immigrants, is well established and integrated in society, making him an admirable representation of the American Dream, based on meritocracy. Stanley to Blanche in scene four: “what I am is one hundred percent American”. “As a Marxist play, the class between God and Devil of the medieval moral was supplanted by the clash between the classes” (Croft, n.d.). The arrival of Blanche exacerbates their social difference: “the Kowalski and the DuBois have different notions”, the modern versus the old but decayed aristocratic Southern state. “Kazan’s direction heavily favoured making Stanley the victim of Blanche’s onslaughts”, Blanche emasculates everything he embodies, giving him no option but to retaliate (Bak, 2004, p. 6).

His admirable self turns into a “gaudy seed bearer” and a “Pig-Pollack-disgusting-vulgar-greasy”. The alliterative plosive sound emphasises on the disgust shown for Stanley, portrayed as lesser than an American, socially diminished by the women in the play: “common as dirt”. Stanley’s appearance “roughly wearing blue work clothes”, his colloquial speech, use of incorrect syntax “Poles”, all disclose his working-class status. His lack of education/intelligence is corroborated by Blanche's comment not noticing “the stamp of genius on Stanley's forehead”, echoing Cornelius’s sense of failure. But one can argue that the reference to the “Napoleonic Code” actually shows his ‘selective knowledge’ exposing a more capitalist aspect of the American Dream, that happiness is based on accumulation of material possessions.

From the bread winner’s role with the “cave man’s description”, “throwing the meat package” in the first scene, Stanley regresses to a less admirable description in scene four, as an “ape-like human”, a particularly offensive, racist and derogatory term, a century after the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery. “Nancy Tischler states about the play “not as a drama of natural selection but rather as a reversal of Darwin’s vision- back to the apes”, a battle of the species that use “sexual aggression for protection and propagation of their culture and Stella is

the prize” (Bak, 2004, p. 8-9). Blanche’s description of Stanley as an animal/subhuman is in continuity with Stella’s previous scene’s rape rendered by Williams’s animalistic stage directions: [Stanley charges on his wife]. [Then they come together with low, animal moans]. Stanley is the “stereotypical batterer”, with a “dual Dr. Jekyll-and-Mr. Hyde’s personality”. In the first scene, he appears affectionate towards his “little woman”. In the third scene, he is manipulative, declines Stella’s advances and goes on abusing her. After the incident, he becomes “vulnerable and dependent” like a child, as he“fears that Stella will leave him”: “My baby doll’s left me [begins to sob uncontrollably]” (Koprince, 2009 p. 52-55). “The final act of domination comes at the end of scene ten, when Stanley carries Blanche offstage and rapes her, depraving her of femininity” (Hefner, 2016, p.7). “In the 1940’s, the notion of domestic violence is not a crime, but merely a family matter that should be handled within the privacy of the home” (Koprince, 2009, p. 57).

While “Stanley is not once gentle, meek or loving” (Hefner, 2016, p. 6), Mitch is not short of a chivalric “natural gentleman”. He stands up for Blanche’s mistreatment by Stanley in the last scene: “I’ll kill you”. Mitch embodies the “Apollonian”, “the restraint and order” as opposed to the “Dionysian”, “the passion and metaphysics”, counterbalancing Stanley’s aggression, restoring humanity into masculinity (Bak, 2004, p. 7). He appears to be the perfect romantic match for Blanche with “sensitive look”, wearing an “alpaca coat”, affectionate: “you need somebody. And I need somebody too” and share of similar past that leaves them widowed: “the Varsouviana Polka”, a constant reminder of her first husband and for Mitch, the “silver case” given by a dying lover. In scene five, “she hopes that Mitch will provide a place where she can rest”, finding “an escape from the sound of Allan’s implacable tread” (Bloom, 2009, p. 156).

But somehow, Mitch feels that he cannot measure against Blanche’s obvious education as an English teacher and against Stanley’s looks. He feels inferior, “awkward” and “depressed”. He needs to gain “muscles”, maybe hiding a more effeminate side of himself. Williams is ambivalent about his homosexuality: “They never give the Nobel Prize to writers who are homosexual” (…) But I’ve never found it necessary to deal with it in my work” (Croft, n.d.). Mitch is also described as “a Mamma’s boy” (Bak, 2004, p. 8), a “cry baby”: “I’ll be alone when she goes”. Sievers refers to Mitch’s “Oedipus complex, who wants to escape his mother yet loyally worshipping her” (Kelly, 2019).

Mitch is Stanley’s loyal old army and new poker buddies, there is a sense of an admirable male bond/camaraderie, when in scene three, he looks after Stanley after his drunken poker night as he “put him on the bed, get a wet towel” and only have an amusing comment on Stella’s abuse throwing to a “terrified” Blanche: “Ho-ho! There’s nothing to be scared of. They’re crazy about each other“ re-enforced by “poker shouldn’t be played in a house with women”, complacent to Stella’s mistreatment. Critics sees Stella as “a masochist battered woman” who secretly enjoys the pain he inflicted upon her” (Koprince, 2009, p. 55). She is “sort of-thrilled” when Stanley “smashed things on their wedding night” and didn’t run away. In scene nine, when Stanley reveals him Blanche’s sexual scandal to regain domination over him, Mitch, betrayed, he is more concerned about his reputation rejecting a ‘dirty’ Blanche: “I don’t want to marry you”. “You are not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother”. It is a recurrent biblical theme in the play, the idea of sin being cleansed and virtue. The “paper lantern” metaphor, being torn by both male characters, as Blanche is being exposed, aged and soiled. Philip C. Kolin comments that “Mitch is both Blanche’s victim and oppressor”. Mitch is like Stanley’s shadow, what he fails at, Stanley succeeds in. “He gets Blanche to admit the truth but is unable to abuse her, leaving the job to the more manly Stanley” (Kelly, 2019).

Stanley and Mitch are both product of a misogynist and homophobic society. In the last scene, Williams portrays a destructive male personality, a “Manichean battle” between the “Evil” Stanley and the “Victim” Blanche (Koprince, 2009, p. 150), “presenting the pessimistic view of modern man destroying the tender aspects of love” (Bak, 2004, p. 5 & p. 11). Stanley incarcerates Blanche into a mental asylum to protect his wife and the new-born baby, further entrenching Stella into a dysfunctional relationship and breaking Mitch’s friendship. While Mitch is seen admirable for standing up for Blanche but not less so for not rescuing her. “Kathleen Hudley argues that ‘Streetcar’ in not a story about desire but rather desire’s destruction” (Bak, 2004, p. 15).

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