

Gender Roles in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

In Tennessee Williams' play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, masculinity and femininity are portrayed as binary, as opposites, and every character in the play conforms to one of these roles, except one. In the late 1940s post-World War II south, there was a strict code of behavior for women. A woman violating this code faced recrimination and often ostracization from society, whereas a man didn't have to follow such a code as he likely created it, and he reaped the benefits of it. These gender roles frame *A Streetcar Named Desire*; there is no room for anything between masculinity and femininity. Alan Gray, Blanche's late husband, however, is a homosexual. He commits suicide after Blanche tells him, "I saw! I know! You disgust me ..." (Williams 1158), thereby setting in motion Blanche's inevitable unraveling. Alan's homosexuality marked him, in the play, as neither male nor female. He was, as his name suggests, in the gray. His separateness, and his wife's condemnation, drove him to kill himself. After her husband's suicide, Blanche nurses her dying family members at the family plantation of Belle Reve, French for a "beautiful dream." The plantation is lost, and Blanche travels to New Orleans to be with her sister Stella. It is here that she encounters her brother-in-law, Stanley. The struggle between Blanche and Stanley, the feminine and the masculine, did not end well for Blanche. In the play, the dichotomy of femininity and masculinity, and the associated gender roles, are apparent in five different ways: agency, power and money, place in the home and in the world, and sexuality.

Before arriving in New Orleans, Blanche moves from her ancestral home of Belle Reve to the second-rate Flamingo Hotel where she has a string of one-night stands which culminates in Blanche being kicked out of the hotel. The feverish pitch with which she sought out sexual

encounters at the hotel, as well as with the soldiers from the camp nearby and with her young student at the school where Blanche taught English, was frenzied and loveless. This does seem to illustrate agency, in that she was making these choices; however, it could be argued that given her mental state, she wasn't capable of making rational decisions. With no option left to her, she travels to New Orleans to be with her sister Stella and Stella's husband Stanley. Immediately, there is friction between Blanche and Stanley. "She is in a perpetual state of displacement, a figure without a home. Indeed, her last home was a hotel; she was a paying customer. Now she is a guest, robbed of all agency and entirely dependent on her hosts" (Harlan). Blanche was trapped, whereas Stanley had all the agency in the world. He was the alpha male with the rights and privileges that entailed, but Blanche was the fading flower with no option but to wither and die.

We see a definite power struggle in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, with the masculine versus the feminine, Blanche versus Stanley. He was the breadwinner, he was the king of his castle, he was the rutting beast, while Blanche was fragile, helpless, and needy. Upon learning from Stella that Belle Reve has been lost, he grows angry because of the real-world monetary effect it has on him. Stanley then tells Blanche, "There is such a thing in this state of Louisiana as the Napoleonic code, according to which whatever belongs to my wife is also mine--and vice versa" (Williams 1133). Thus began Stanley's campaign against Blanche. In him, masculinity was harsh realism. Blanche was dreams, imagination, and illusion. Stanley resents Blanche's presence in his world as he has no wish to share his wife's attention, and he resents what he sees as Blanche's swindling of his share of Belle Reve. In addition, Blanche's immersion in her illusion thwarted his reality. Abusing his male power, he took great pleasure in bringing her down, using her past as his weapon. "She had been an English teacher which, like nursing, was an acceptable

profession for a woman because it was an extension of their roles in the home. Blanche loses her job and her most prized possession, her reputation as a pure woman, thus also her power” (Henry).

The three women in the play, Blanche, Stella, and Eunice, conformed to the gender roles associated with the home and in the world at large. Eunice, the Kowalski’s upstairs neighbor, accepted her husband’s affections despite his physical abuse. After Stanley assaulted Stella, Eunice offered shelter to Stella and Blanche in her apartment. She yelled at Stanley, “You can’t beat on a woman an’ then call ‘er back!” (Williams 1141) Eunice herself was a victim of domestic violence, and yet she railed at Stanley for doing the same thing to Stella that Eunice’s husband Steve did to her. Both Eunice and Stella have conformed to the gender role of a woman standing by her man, abiding by his wishes, and being a vessel for his masculinity. Blanche is more shocked by Stella’s subsequent return to Stanley than by the violence itself. She was ultimately accepting of it because she did not leave, can’t leave, she had nowhere to go. Just like her sister. They were bound by the dictates of society, a society that had already rejected Blanche. Gender roles dictate that women are mothers, wives, caretakers, and housekeepers, while men dominate their world and move freely in it. “Men can offer protection and security, and because men are able to provide what would be difficult, if not impossible, for women of that time to obtain on their own, the less desirable qualities that the men exhibit are either rationalized or ignored. Blanche realized that she needs a man not only to satisfy society's expectations of her but also to satisfy her own emotional and financial needs” (Davis).

There are profoundly sexual elements in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, from the overt to the suggestive. Stanley was unbridled and animalistic sex. Blanche had once been promiscuous and now wanted to hide under a mantle of unspoiled virginity like a true Southern belle. Her

sexuality was barely simmering beneath the surface, masked because she knew that gender roles required it. An openly sexual woman was highly frowned upon (Wei, 2010), though she had, at one point in time, been just such a woman, a fact she went to great pains to conceal. Physical appearance was very important to Blanche. To Stella she says, "...turn that over-light off! Turn that off! I won't be looked at in this merciless glare!" (Williams 1122) And to Stanley, shortly after meeting him for the first time, she says, "It's hard to stay looking fresh. I haven't washed or even powdered my face and-- here you are!" (Williams 1128) After the assault on Stella, Stanley sobers up a bit, goes outside, and bellows up to Eunice's. He mournfully calls out Stella's name, saying, "I want my baby down here" (Williams 1141). Stella appears and "they come together with low, animal moans" (Williams 1142). This was the animalistic virility of Stanley appealing to the unladylike subservience of Stella. The following day she tells Blanche, "But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark--that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant" (Williams 1146), signifying a sexual servitude. Blanche's flirtation with Mitch, a buddy of Stanley's, ends in disaster despite the illusion that he will marry her. Stanley, in his effort to defrock and destroy Blanche, has relayed details of Blanche's dubious past to Mitch. Later, when Blanche is alone in the apartment, Mitch comes. He has been drinking. He torments Blanche, tearing down the paper lantern and exposing her. She cries, "I don't want realism. I want magic!" (Williams 1169) Realism triumphs as he rejects her, and fumbles at her to claim what he believes has been withheld from him. He leaves, and a short time later, Stanley returns from the hospital where Stella is giving birth. He finds Blanche drunk and clad in a dilapidated white evening gown that is reminiscent of a virginal bride. Their confrontation reaches a head when Stanley comes toward her, menacing. "So you want some roughhouse! All right, let's have some roughhouse!...We've had this date with each other from the beginning!"

(Williams 1175) Both Mitch and Stanley condemn her for a promiscuity that they themselves are sanctioned to exercise. He rejects her as Mitch did and in raping her, he repudiates her right to personhood.

The play ends with Blanche in an altered, ethereal state. Her simmering sexuality was no longer in evidence. She did, however, retain her fantasy world, ensconced in the dream that Shep Huntleigh, a millionaire she may or may not have known, is coming to take her away, which would move her from one place of dependence on a male to another. Upon seeing the doctor from, presumably, a mental hospital as a kind stranger, she says, “Whoever you are--I have always depended on the kindness of strangers” (Williams 1181). Blanche was broken, her dependence on men was complete. She was illusion, whereas Stanley, the man who orchestrated Blanche’s commitment to the hospital, was triumphant realism, confident and secure in his masculinity. He had upheld the societal gender norms that command a double standard in agency, power and money, place in the home and in the world, and sexuality. He knelt beside his crying wife and tried to soothe her while his fingers groped for the opening of her blouse.

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