

Oppositions and their  
purpose in 'a  
streetcar named  
desire' and 'the  
birthday par...



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Both Harold Pinter and Tennessee Williams depict vivid and intimidating oppositions in their characters Stanley Kowalski and Goldberg and McCann. The oppositions in both *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Birthday Party* strive to assert their power over their victims, Blanche DuBois and Stanley Webber, through the emergence of their pasts to the present, portrayed in the plays. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, an increased knowledge of Blanche's background inflicted on her by Stanley K creates a lucid portrayal of Blanche's intrinsic torment. On the other hand, Pinter gives no greater insight into Stanley W's character from the interrogation of Goldberg and McCann, and instead creates ambiguity as to who Stanley W, and the oppositions, actually are. This confusion in identity, present in both plays, becomes clearer in *Streetcar Named Desire* through Stanley K's investigation, despite Stanley possessing less and more direct speech in comparison to Blanche, whereas Goldberg and McCann create more uncertainty in their heavy use of speech.

The oppositions in both *The Birthday Party* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* represent order, society and justice, oppressing the those who stray from societal progression. Despite this similarity, Williams depicts Stanley K to lead his cause, whereas Goldberg and McCann clearly serve a higher order. When Stanley K first meets Blanche, he asserts his "territory" (p. 14), which illustrates him as primal and possessive, unwilling to give way to Blanche, or compromise his power. Williams portrays Stanley's sole leadership as he presents himself as the voice of Justice, representing "the Napoleonic code" (p. 18), whereby he gains possession of what is Blanche's or Stella's. This implies that Stanley believes that his way of life is correct, yet this

superiority results in the oppression of Blanche. Stella reflects on the consequences that Stanley's power has on Blanche, as she accuses him of having "abused [Blanche], and forced her to change" (p. 81).

In *A Streetcar Named Desire* it is clear that this oppression derives directly from Stanley's own desperation for power and leadership, whereas in *The Birthday Party*, the abuse of Stanley W appears to be a result of higher orders. This is revealed as Goldberg refers to the interrogation of Stanley W as a "job" (p. 29), where Stanley is the "subject" (p. 30). This language is more distant and official, suggesting Stanley, the "subject", to be only one of many victims. Pinter depicts the existence of a powerful, oppressive state or group, as McCann states that Stanley "betrayed the organisation" (p. 48). The audience also gains greater understanding as to the size and power of this "organisation" as it is referred to by Goldberg as "our breed" (p. 52), suggesting it to control potentially the whole of society. This language also implies a superiority, reflecting that of the Nazis, where quality of "breed" is of greatest importance. Those not contributing to this are discriminated against, removed from society.

Both sets of oppositions see their way of life as relevant and correct and anyone who does not contribute to this as useless, to be changed or eradicated. Thus, both Stanley K and Goldberg and McCann reflect the 1950s societies that don't allow for difference, their victims helpless and vulnerable to the change that leaves them behind. By Pinter suggesting that Goldberg and McCann are the hitmen of a greater institution he is potentially expressing hypocrisy in the post-war state that echoes the Nazi fascist

qualities that Britain fought in the war. Yet Pinter shows attempts to mask

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this, as the oppressors in *The Birthday Party* are traditionally the oppressed, Goldberg Jewish and McCann Irish. Perhaps, through this, Pinter in fact alludes to the greater terror of the state that is above Goldberg and McCann, fear forcing the oppressed into violence. On the other hand, as Stanley appears to act alone, and is the epitome of masculinity, racial diversity and realism, Williams instead reflects on the people led power that replaces the tradition that kept Blanche safe.

There is also a contrast between the quality and quantity of language used by the oppositions in both plays. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stanley K controls the plot with simple, but brutally purposeful speech, even though Blanche possesses many dramatic extended speeches. In comparison to Blanche's exaggerated diatribes, Stanley K speaks with direct aggression, derived from investigation "from the most reliable sources." Williams structures Stanley's assault on Blanche; the clarity in stating "lie number one" gives greater emphasis to the truth that he uses to break down Blanche. Like the effect of the chaotic verbal assault in *The Birthday Party*, the direct truth behind Blanche's lies that Stanley K expresses reduces Blanche and her speech into only painful exclamations:

" Stanley: As a matter of fact there wasn't no wires at all! Blanche: Oh, oh!  
Stanley: There isn't no millionaire! And Mitch didn't come back with roses ' cause I know where he is - Blanche: Oh! Stanley: There isn't a goddam thing but imagination! Blanche: Oh!"

In *The Birthday Party*, on the other hand, Stanley W loses his ability to speak as a consequence of Goldberg and McCann's plentiful and absurd speech.

Pinter's oppositions bombard Stanley with completely invented notions about him, these overwhelming Stanley, his speech and ability to process information conquered by confusion. Unlike in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, where Blanche still attempts to protect herself following Stanley K's interrogation, Stanley W soon becomes completely defeated. His speech is soon lost after this verbal assault of nonsense talk:

“ Stanley: What wife? Goldberg: What have you done with your wife?  
McCann: He's killed his wife! Goldberg: Why did you kill your wife? Stanley:  
What wife? McCann: How did he kill her? Goldberg: How did you kill her?  
McCann: He throttled her. Goldberg: With arsenic.”

This is similar to the speech between opposition and victim in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, yet Stanley W is broken down by the absurdity in Goldberg and McCann's assault, rather than the truth which ruins Blanche. Thus, it is clear that each playwright illustrates the power of opposite forces to render their victims helpless. Williams focuses on the cruelty and power of truth in the face of Blanche's imagination and fantasy, whereas Pinter displays the profound despair of not knowing anything in Stanley's confusion and breakdown from the chaotic and absurd questioning of Goldberg and McCann.

The emphasis on the truth of Blanche's past in Stanley K's interrogation causes the reader to perceive a greater understanding of them both intrinsically, but with Goldberg and McCann, despite their vocal presence and pursuit, the audience gains no understanding of who they are. Williams exposes insight into Blanche's character through Stanley's discoveries about

her, but also through Blanche's behaviour when with different people. When alone, the audience becomes aware of her childlike innocence, when with Mitch, her past, and why she hides from it, is exposed and when with Stanley K, the audience perceives the façade that she wears for self-protection. Ultimately, as Blanche is further broken down by Stanley K's interrogation over the plot progression, her inner torment is further revealed. In comparison, there is no greater insight into Stanley W's character from Goldberg and McCann's pursuit in *The Birthday Party*. They only create more confusion as to who Stanley is and what his past contains. Through this, Pinter encourages a more traumatising evaluation of Stanley, the audience's fear heightened as he could have potentially done something horrific or nothing at all. Yet Stanley's sense of fear at the beginning shows his inability to cope with change or in fact suggests that he is indeed running from something: "they won't come. Someone's taking the Michael. It's a false alarm. A false alarm." As a result, Pinter suggests the individual's inability to even trust themselves, along with the sense of threat triggered by anything new or different.

The oppositions also reveal nothing about themselves during the interrogation, even their names are uncertain, Goldberg going by Nat, "Simey" and "Benny". The validity of Goldberg's stereotypically Jewish past is also questionable, as he uses the same description- "'Simey!' My old mum used to shout, 'quick before it gets cold.' And there on the table what would I see? The nicest piece of gefilte fish you could wish to find on a plate"- for his wife, replacing only the food product for a different typically Jewish one. This unrealistic repetition implies a sense of forced character within

Goldberg, leaving the audience with no knowledge of who he actually is, let alone ability to trust him.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the audience does gain understanding of the opposition, Stanley K, through his interrogation of Blanche. This principally is an insecurity about a lack of identity, which is also glimpsed within Goldberg's character briefly. Stanley K struggles with his lack of knowledge about Blanche's past, and also the way that Blanche's presence imbalances his identity as powerful, as he sees her as a threat to his way of life.

Consequently, he is depicted to desperately pile together "evidence" to create the Blanche that appears weaker than him, reinforcing his identity as powerful. Pinter also conveys Goldberg to be affected by loss of identity, this becoming apparent as he is portrayed as a victim of his own verbal assault. Within his nonsense talk, lifting phrases from songs, the Bible and WW1 propaganda, he becomes uncertain of who he really is, emerging "(vacant), (desperate), (lost)." Pinter gives the impression that Goldberg has been patching together a personality from all of these fragments of society, but gets lost within them. Perhaps, he is revealing brief disillusionment in being just one of many, serving the state, meaningless individually.

It is within this momentary break down that the audience is able to glimpse a small part of Goldberg's character, and this is him being unsure of who he is. It is through this paradox that Pinter emphasises our lack of ability to know anything. Thus it is clear that as oppositions, both Stanley K and Goldberg have power over other characters but struggle to maintain it over themselves.

This lack of individuality is perhaps also shown within Goldberg's sentimentality. Despite it being uncertain as to whether any of this is true, Goldberg finds comfort in the reminiscing to a time before working as he does now. Through this and both Goldberg and McCann representing stereotypical figures, in religion and origin, that they both embody tradition, contrasting to Stanley K. Stanley is the epitome of change in America, representing the diversity of New Orleans. In comparison to Blanche's traditional way of living as the southern belle, Stanley has "different notions". In his conflict with Blanche, Stanley is fighting against tradition in a plea to progress with his way of life. On the other hand, Goldberg lives through his childhood nostalgia, able to "see it like yesterday". Despite this potentially not being true, he seems comforted to live not only in the present. McCann represents traditional Ireland, expressing the voice of the past in his song. Therefore, despite their identities potentially being false, their embodiment of traditional roles reflects on the emphasis on tradition in the greater "organisation". Thus, the oppositions in *The Birthday Party* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* represent opposite forces, Goldberg and McCann oppressing those who don't contribute to the traditional perception of society, and Stanley K, seeing no place for tradition and fantasy within his changing America.

Thus, it is clear that, although the oppositions in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Birthday Party* both act successfully to intimidate the victims and remove them from their ways of living, they both do so in opposite ways. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stanley K uses the truth, simple and direct, to break down Blanche, whereas Goldberg and McCann of *The Birthday Party* are



orchestrated to bombard Stanley W with absurd and chaotic accusations, confusion and fear at the lack of knowledge resulting in his destruction. Stanley K also represents the new, changing America, and, in contrast, Goldberg and McCann embody tradition, working for a greater "organisation" that preserves society, expelling those who do not contribute. Yet both Stanley K and Goldberg and McCann potentially act as opposition in protection of themselves. Stanley oppresses Blanche for fear of identity loss as leader and Goldberg and McCann are perhaps intimidated into violence by a higher power, that turns the oppressed into the oppressors. Lack of identity, despite this being more prominent in The Birthday Party, seems to play a major part in the way that the oppositions act, forced into powerful positions for fear to be something.