

# Stanley kowalski: villain or family man?

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When looking at *A Streetcar Named Desire* – a tragedy, after all – it is traditionally required that there should be a selected antagonist, a ‘villain’ so to speak. Stanley Kowalski, you could argue, is that ‘villain’. It is evident that throughout the play he is responsible for much of Blanche’s downfall and ultimate destruction, learning to break her down by his knowledge of her indiscreet past of promiscuity. In addition, we can look at the way he treats Stella, his wife, the other main female role in the piece – violent outbursts such as in Scene 3 and chauvinistic comments can lead us to assume he is a cruel character. However we have to consider the circumstances that this play is set in – the working class environment that is fueled by ambition and set for the future. Stanley is very much a family man who strives for success, acting in order to sustain his and their future together. So perhaps, he is not wholly the villain that we could assume him to be.

From the instance that we meet Stanley, it is apparent that he is a dominant force – the “richly feathered male bird” – and he is able to use this authority to cause Blanche extensive pain. This could be a reason for us to label him as a ‘villain’. His dominance over the people in his life is undeniably powerful and used cruelly. Stella, for example, inevitably chooses to stay with him over Blanche at the end of the play because of the sexual dominance he has over her. The audience is reminded of this libido in the very final image – of Stanley “[finding] the opening of her blouse”, and hence the reason that Stella chooses to ignore her sister’s “story” of the devastating rape that crushes Blanche and leaves Stanley superior. But his dominance over Stella is not the most important in the piece – since he is responsible for Blanche’s downfall it is necessary to consider his actions

towards her. When he gives her the ticket back to Laurel in Scene 9, the audience sees how cruel Stanley can be. He wields dominance in this moment as he teases her with the ticket, as though it were a gift – saying “ I hope you like it!”. When it is revealed to be a ticket back to Laurel, Blanche’s response reflects that of the audience, as we are horrified at the deceptive action. Not only is he symbolically sending her back to her troubled past, but he also chooses to set the moment up as though it would be a gift – something that would illustrate kindness and generosity. It is evident that these are not Stanley’s aims, and that he feels only antipathy for Blanche and all that she stands for (the gentility of the Deep South and the faded culture it has become). By controlling this scenario and twisting Blanche’s emotions around, Stanley is able to cause further emotional damage. Williams’ own sympathy for the destruction of the Deep South and its gentility means that this act was decidedly cruel – he wanted us as an audience to see Blanche’s horrified and sickening response to feel pity rather than believing that she deserves that pain. Williams creates empathy for his protagonist in this way. Additionally, use of plastic theatre in the form of the Varsouviana – which only the audience and Blanche can hear – emulates this further as they are invited to resonate and connect with Blanche’s emotions alone at this moment. Hence, Stanley is presented as cruel and intentionally harming to others in his life – particularly Blanche as he consistently adds to her distress and pain.

Furthermore, the way that he often treats Stella violently could indicate that Stanley is a villain. His outbursts are hugely forceful and often chauvinistic which suggests a lack of care as to how he considers those around him –

including his loved ones. His comment during Scene 3 that the “hens cut out that conversation” is particularly misogynistic and suggests a level of selfishness, since his wife and sister-in-law are expected to be out of the way or silent during the men’s poker game. Later in this scene we see another moment that is far more violent, and illustrates the fact that he will remove anyone who stands in his pathway to a goal. When Blanche continues to play the radio and maintain a sphere of control over Mitch – “[waltzing]...with romantic gestures” – Stanley “fiercely...tosses the [radio] out of the window”. When Stella rushes through to the men and asks that they leave, to end the evening, Stanley wildly lashes out at her and she is hit. It is notable how quickly this happens. In the stage directions there are several quick-fire actions described, and the reader can imagine the speed at which they all happen. Using audible elements of the women “[crying out]” and “[screaming]” along with action verbs such as “advances” and “grappling”, Williams creates the sense of sudden aggression mixed with hysteria.

The rapidity of the dramatic moment illustrates how quickly Stanley lashes out and becomes wild with violence – he is willing in that moment to attack Stella who is standing in the way of his evening going as planned. We see this expectation – that he be the one in control – in Scene 8 when he exclaims “I am the king around here” and “hurls” some crockery on the floor. This reference to Huey Long indicates his belief in assertion of power, hard work and being the “king” of his family. In moments such as these, women (even the one he loves) are merely secondary in the way that he often treats them – he expects to be the “king” and maintain this position of power consistently. Williams’ own father, Cornelius, brought vicious anger

into their family home and this had a significant effect on his younger sister Rose. Already coping with mental illness, Rose shrunk further into herself as a result of her father's regular rage. It is possible then that Williams wanted to draw attention to the issues of violence in the home since it had strong effects on his sister and himself growing up – particularly as Rose later had to be hospitalized due to her fleeting mental security. Portraying this paternal violence through Stanley enables Williams to draw upon the damaging effects that ensues – including the effect that these sudden outbursts have on Blanche (who is particularly fragile and who we eventually come to pity the most) means that the audience becomes aware of such issues.

However it is notable that Stanley's actions are in favor of his family and their future. He ultimately acts to sustain and provide for Stella at the end of the day, though his outbursts are often borderline abusive and intimidating. When we first see Stanley he is returning home with a “ red-stained package” of meat – Williams portrays the image of a primitive hunter coming home with food for his family here. In addition, during an outburst of Scene 7, he announces that he is “ one hundred per cent. American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it.” This patriotic moment reminds us that Stanley is loyal to and focused on the lifestyle he has built in America. Stella too indicates how intent he is on the future and working hard by telling Blanche “ Stanley's the only one of his crowd that's likely to get anywhere.” So although it is immensely cruel what he does to Blanche, these actions have the sole purpose of removing the past – something that she very much embodies. Living in the modern world of New

Orleans, Williams often felt nostalgia for the Deep South where he grew up and noticed how its remnants were gradually fading away. He embodies the beauty and the sadness of this culture disappearing in the form of Blanche to express his affinity with it. In order to proceed and move towards the future with Stella, Stanley has to eliminate the reminders of the Deep South (notably, Blanche) so that Stella will stay pulled down from the “columns” with him and their child.

Williams indicates to his audience, then, that there is a level of complexity to Stanley that cannot be underestimated – we cannot pin the label of ‘villain’ onto these characters as we can do with traditional tragedies. Though he is indeed, cruel at times, his goal has the best interests of Stella (and himself) at heart...though it is difficult for others to understand – including audience members – Stanley intends to proceed in life even if it does mean harming individuals who stand in his way. However, he cannot simply be labelled as a ‘villain’.