

Misogyny in a street car named desire

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Women and Misogyny and Fatalism in Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar

Named Desire Tennessee Williams wrote this critically acclaimed play during the 20th century when women and their place in society were greatly challenged. According to Boydston (2004) men were breadwinners and women resided in the home where they would raise children and maintain the home. As protector of the home, women exhibited characteristics such as piety, purity and domesticity. The notion of women entering the workforce, she continued, threatened the ideals of true womanhood and masculinity.

In other words the woman's foray into the man's sphere violated the separation of roles between men and women because the 'public sphere' was reserved for men. It is this ideology that forms the basis for the misogynistic and fatalistic view of women in the play. Fatalism as defined by Abrams (2005) is the belief that all events are predetermined and are; therefore, inevitable. As a consequence, a submissive attitude to events results from such a belief.

Through characterization and the choice of dramatic genre, The Streetcar Named Desire exposes the deleterious effects of misogyny on women and the dominance that men wield over subservient powerless women. The characterization of the dominant characters in the play develops the idea of misogyny and fatalism. Stanley the male dominant in the play is seen as an alpha male. True to the custom of Williams' characterization of men from the North, Stanley is cast as a 'brutish' character who 'sizes women up at a glance with sexual classifications'.

Stanley does not regard women as being valuable apart from their worth in slaking his sexual desires. Stanley believes that women exist to serve his needs, respect him and obey him without question. This is in keeping with the era in which the play was written and the fact that men were seen as the stronger of the sexes. His language and behaviour are laden with vulgar sexual overtones. Stanley Kowalski objectifies women as he values their physique; however, he ignores the innate needs and complexities of the women he claims as his.

Stanley uses sex and his brute strength to subdue the women who fall into his circle. After physically abusing his wife he uses sex to substantiate his insincere apology. He also uses sex to comfort Stella after Blanche leaves and ultimately rapes Blanche in order to regain his sense of manliness and bring her down from the 'columns' she had built her life on which seemed superior to him. In scene one, Stanley forces a packet of meat upon his wife; this symbolizes his male dominance in an increasingly patriarchal society. He acquires a feeling of superiority from this standpoint.

Williams depicts Stanley receiving his wife's fondness with "lordly composure"; this insinuates that Stanley believes that he deserves his wife's respect and devotion without having to work for it in any way because he is a man; he believes that she should have these feelings towards him as a matter of automation. The statement: "Be comfortable is my motto," is extremely true for Stanley as he does what he wishes and disregards the consequences. Through dialogue such as this, Williams asserts that Stanley inherently fails to take into account the repercussions his own requirements and desires have on others.

He is in total control and the only person endowed with power; therefore the only person he takes into consideration - and the only person his wife is allowed to take into concern - is himself. The fatalistic view of women is evident in William's characterization of Stanley's misogynistic behaviour which is promulgated by his passive wife Stella. She accepts his crude behaviour and cleans up after him. Stella does not think for herself and as a result she fears life without her abusive husband. She depends totally on him for economic survival and for her sense of self.

As a result she acquiesces to his every whim and fancy and accepts and blames herself for his physical and verbal abuse. She betrays her own thoughts and chooses her husband and places her sister in an asylum. By refusing to believe that Stanley raped her sister, she reconciles her decision to continue living with him. Williams' depiction of Stella alludes to the idea that her future is linked to her submissive nature and the tenets of fatalism. She hardly speaks and when she does her speech is barely audible. Stella is presented as a flat character with no imagination or complexities.

Additionally, Blanche is cast as a foil to the misogynistic Stanley and the polar opposite of her sister, Stella. From the first scene, Williams creates antagonism between Blanche and Stanley and this sets the stage for the descent and discord that runs from beginning to denouement in the play. The seeming purity and lofty air proffered by Blanche is only an attempt at sophistry to hide the shame of her promiscuous life. Her education allows her to play the part of the demure genteel lady, while being willing to seduce an unsuspecting newspaper boy.

Blanche uses her sexuality to achieve things and although she may seem different from Stella in her vociferous opposition to Stanley's physical abuse, the two sisters were very alike in that they found their own sense of self and value in their relationships with men. Williams underscores this with his discussion of Blanche's promiscuity, the death of her homosexual husband, and her relationships with students at the school at which she taught. Blanche flirts and teases Stanley until she receives the onslaught of his overpowering primal animalistic behaviour, when she is raped.

Through this ultimate transgression, Williams shows that the women of that era who tried to escape the prescribed roles assigned to them will be destroyed. Stanley's outright disgrace of Blanche allows him to gain the transcendence and puts her effectually in her place. Blanche seems fated for this as she has built a fantasy world for herself where she is constantly pretending. One would think that as a result of her constant incredulous construction of reality other than what it is, Blanche was fated to the mental breakdown which she experienced at the end of the play.

In addition to characterization, Williams also uses the dramatic genre to create the misogynistic and fatalistic view of women in the play. The play is written as a modern tragedy. Griffith (2006) describes a tragedy as a subgenre of drama that, according to Aristotle, contains conventions such as a larger-than-life hero whose flaw brings about a precipitous fall and whose fate inspires pity and fear in the audience. In the play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche is this heroine whose actions grab the attention of the audience/reader.

From her entrance her incongruity with Elysian Fields, is evident. She is from Belle Reve, a place of “ beautifuldreams”. Blanche’s great flaw is that she fails to accept the changes that are happening in the world. She tries to recapture her lost virtue and the respect she once had through pretense, deceit, self-aggrandizement and pride. Her fantastical ideas about what she deserves are exposed by her hypocrisy. Her vanity makes her rude and obnoxious as she believes that she was better than those with whom she had to share the ‘ hovel’.

Finally her lies cause her to lose the love she tries to gain and the sanity she tries to preserve. Her deceit and callous treatment of others, in an attempt to make herself seem superior, result in her final delusion and separation from reality. The men she loves disappoint her, and she, even in a delusive state, finds that she must depend on a man for sustenance. Blanche’s tragedy comes from her own vanity, duplicity and wantonness which she hides under her superior intellect and vocabulary.