

Stanley's Attitudes in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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I. Introduction

In Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, I first realized Stanley's macho qualities when he tossed the package of meat at his wife Stella. At the beginning of the play, Stanley Kowalski, who is Polish, seems to be quite strong physically and mentally. I can imagine this from the opening scene. The package of meat is very heavy because Stella shouts in protest, but she manages to catch it breathlessly. A second reason for my belief in Stanley's macho's qualities is that he was a soldier, "[a] Master Sergeant in the Engineers' Corps" (Sc 1.14.7)* in World War II. Tennessee Williams writes in a later scene: "[Stanley] wears an undershirt and grease-stained seersucker pants" (Sc 4.59.15-6). Obviously, he has equally physical hobbies. He likes to go bowling with his friends, and he has his own shoes and bowling ball. I think he is the best bowler among Mitch, Steve, and Pablo. Furthermore, Stanley likes his alcohol straight. One of his greatest pastimes is drinking whiskey. Stanley says, "Liquor goes fast in hot weather" (Sc 1.20.8). He also likes playing poker with Mitch, Steve, and Pablo, and usually they play late into the night. Williams explains: "[They] wear colored shirts, solid blues, a purple, a red-and-white check, a light green, and they are men at the peak of their physical manhood, as coarse and direct and powerful as the primary colors" (Sc 3.35.7-10). Stanley's favorite activity, it seems to me, is to have sex with Stella. It is an essential desire for him. Even if they quarrel, they have sex together afterward! It seems as if they have sex every day.

I think that at the opening of the play Stanley is very self-assured. He can control his three male friends. Stanley decides when to bowl with his pals and where they will bowl. In addition, he is very confident about his job. He works, perhaps as a mechanic of machines, at a factory. He says to Stella that he is disappointed when mechanics do not work seriously, so he helps them. He can control them, and he believes he can control Stella too. After all, he thinks he is king in their apartment. He earns much money, and he has the right to decide everything concerned about them. In Scene Eight, Stanley boasts to Blanche:

*All the writer's quotations in *A Streetcar Named Desire* are taken from Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, ed. by Hiroatsu Asada (Tokyo: Kinsendo, 1997); the page references appear in parentheses in the text, Scene, page, and line(s) appearing, for example, as Sc 1.14.7. instead of Scene One, p.14, 1.7.

“Remember what Huey Long said— ‘Every Man is a King!’ And I am the king around here, so don’t forget it!” (Sc 8.97.1-3). Moreover, he believes that he is quite an attractive person to Stella. He knows she loves him, and she believes he loves her. Together they can satisfy their desires very well. I guess that his confidence is partly due to Stanley’s experiences in World War II. He said that only one soldier out of five would survive at Salerno in the war, but Stanley was certain he would survive, and he did.

However, Stanley changes quite radically after Blanche DuBois, Stella’s older sister, comes to Stanley and Stella’s apartment. It is especially due to Blanche that Stanley’s attitudes to the other characters change in the play. One reason for this is that Stanley perhaps cannot have sex with Stella in their apartment when Blanche is present. The result is that he starts to have a great deal of trouble with Mitch, Stella, and of course Blanche. I believe the major reason for his changing attitude is that he cannot satisfy his strong sexual desires. Thomas P. Adler notes, Stanley “is a smasher, not only of objects but of people; he becomes increasingly violent as the play proceeds.”¹ Because Stanley cannot control himself through moral force, he exerts his authority through physical means.

I find three important changes in Stanley’s attitudes as the play goes on. One change is Stanley’s attitude to Mitch. Mitch is Stanley’s best friend. Stanley was able to gain much bad information about Blanche’s life in Laurel; however, Mitch loves her and wants to marry her, and a problem ensues. The second change is Stanley’s attitude to Stella. Stella and Stanley were blissfully happy before Blanche came to their apartment, but after Blanche came, Stella and Stanley had a great deal of trouble. The third and most important change is Stanley’s attitude to Blanche. Blanche is Stella’s older sister, so Blanche is Stanley’s sister-in-law. At first, Stanley normally tries to have friendly contact with Blanche, but he gradually starts to doubt her. When Blanche says “he’s common!” (Sc 4.59.17) and calls him “swine” (Sc 10.116.18), he wants to have revenge against her, and he starts to use a great many ironies in talking to Blanche and about her. Afterwards, Stanley’s attitude to Blanche changed even more radically.

II. Stanley’s Attitude to Mitch

Not only did Stanley’s attitude to Blanche change, but his attitudes to Mitch changed quite a bit in the course of the play. Stanley and Mitch had a good friendship before Blanche came to Stanley’s apartment. I think Mitch is Stanley’s best friend. Stanley and Mitch had been soldiers together, and they had survived World War II. Afterwards, Stanley and Mitch worked at the same factory, and at the factory Stanley worked in a higher position as an engineer. In addition, Stanley and Mitch always went bowling with their friends. Moreover, at that time they both seemed to be very strong physically. In the opening scene, Williams describes

the two men: "*They are about twenty-eight or thirty years old, roughly dressed in blue denim work clothes*" (Sc 1.4.9-10). Stanley and Mitch played poker with their friends at Stanley's apartment late at night. In Scene Three, Mitch won the poker bets; on the other hand, Stanley lost. Once Stanley said, "When I'm losing you want to eat! Ante up! Openers? Openers! Get y'r ass off the table, Mitch. Nothing belongs on a poker table but cards, chips and whiskey." (Sc 3.36.4-6)

One night when Stanley and Mitch were playing poker with their friends at Stanley's apartment, Mitch met Blanche by chance for the first time on his way out of the bathroom. Williams comments: "*Blanche knocks. Mitch opens the [bathroom] door and comes out, still wiping his hands on a towel*" (Sc 3.38.15-6). It seemed to me that Mitch suddenly fell in love with Blanche at a glance. His mother, who was very sick, wanted him to marry a good woman, so he perhaps wanted to marry Blanche quickly as he asked her some questions about herself.

However, Stanley did not want Mitch to marry Blanche because, of course, Stanley did not like Blanche and because Stanley guessed Blanche would trap Mitch, so Stanley's attitude to Mitch changed. More serious reasons why Stanley doubted Blanche were her dresses, her accessories, and Belle Reve, so he made his supply man Shaw get information about Blanche in Laurel, Mississippi, where Blanche and Stella had been born and had long lived together. At last, Stanley received shocking information about Blanche in Laurel from Shaw. Stanley told Mitch these discoveries. Mitch could not believe the information, so Mitch made the company's supply man in Laurel do research on Blanche in Laurel. When he received the report, Mitch found the information about Blanche true. Mitch was shocked to hear the news, so he did not go to the birthday party for Blanche. Adler explains: "Not only in the volatility and barely controlled violence of a man unable to control his own life, but also in his reliance on discovering 'the facts' about Blanche's past escapades instead of listening to what his heart and his instincts tell him, Mitch resembles Stanley."² Just as Stanley wanted to uncover the truth about Blanche, Mitch managed to seek out the same truth. At that point Mitch perhaps was the same exposé as Stanley.

Yet it was Stanley who opposed Mitch's desire to marry Blanche. Stanley must have wanted to tell Mitch that Blanche would trap him. Finally Stanley convinced Mitch and controlled him. In Scene Ten, when Stanley started to win at poker, I think it was because Stanley could satisfy his strong desire to make Mitch give up his marriage with Blanche. Francis Donahue observes:

When Stella prepares a birthday party for Blanche and the latter is eagerly awaiting the arrival of Mitch, Stanley announces haughtily that Mitch is not coming; he has revealed Blanche's past to Mitch, for he didn't want his best friend to marry a person like Blanche. Stanley thus wrecks her last hope of

marriage.³

Stanley probably hopes Mitch will marry a good woman, not Blanche, and Mitch will settle down into a happy life.

However, in the last scene of the play Blanche became overwrought. Mitch perhaps thought that was because of Stanley's terrible behavior to Blanche, so Mitch hated Stanley. Eventually Stanley could not control Mitch.

III. Stanley's Attitude to Stella

If Stanley changed Mitch's plans, he managed to radically alter his wife's attitudes to him. Before Blanche came to Stanley's apartment, Stanley and his wife Stella were ecstatic. They were living joyfully together, and they always enjoyed sex. As a result, Stella became pregnant. I think he was very attractive to Stella because he was a macho person and could control her. The critic Alice Griffin comments:

Because of Stanley's overwhelming physical attraction, Stella has been able to abandon her previous values and to adjust to life in a situation that is 'Elysian Fields' for her. In time the attraction of the 'colored lights' might wear off, but at present she is contented and happy with Stanley.⁴

His attraction saved her from suffering and kept her with him.

When Blanche came, Stella was happy to see her older sister Blanche. They had not seen each other for a long time. However, Stanley was not likely to enjoy Blanche as a visitor. Her presence would prevent him from having sex with Stella. Also, Blanche was Stella's sister, and Stella told him to be gentle to Blanche. He felt very embarrassed because he could not satisfy his strong sexual desire, so he started to doubt Blanche. At first, he doubted Blanche about Belle Reve and about her clothes and her accessories. After he said, "Then where's the money if the place [Bell Reve] was sold?" (Sc 2.25.16), he wanted to see the legal papers connected to Belle Reve, and he told Stella that he would make his acquaintance check on Blanche's clothes and accessories. Stanley also talked about the Napoleonic code. Stanley said to Stella, "In the state of Louisiana we have the Napoleonic code according to which what belongs to the wife belongs to the husband..." (Sc 2.24.29/25.1-2). I think his desire for money was as strong as his sexual desire at that time.

However, Stella believed in Blanche. Even if Stanley told Stella shocking information about Blanche in Laurel, Stella did not believe it. Stanley wanted Stella to believe the information, but Stella did not. Stanley could not satisfy his desire that he wanted to control Stella, so he tended to lose his temper and become

violent to Stella. Williams' description is vivid: "*Stanley stalks fiercely through the portieres into the bedroom. He crosses to the small white radio and snatches it off the table*" (Sc 3.45.27-9). Thus he threw the radio out the window. At Blanche's birthday party, when Stella told Stanley to remove some dishes on the table, he hurled a plate to the floor and said, "My place is cleared! You want me to clear your places?" (Sc 8.97.4-5).

The most violent behavior of Stanley to Stella was on the night he played poker with his three friends, and Stanley hit Stella even though Stella was expecting a child. However, Stanley seemed to be very weak afterwards. Over the phone Stanley told Stella to come back home, and he cried out in front of his apartment, "*STELL-LAHHHHH!*" (Sc 3.49.11). Then Stella went back to Stanley. Of course, her returning to his home was due to her having a strong attraction to him.

Certainly Stella wanted to be with Blanche; on the other hand, Stanley thought he and Stella would be happy again if Blanche left their apartment. Comments Bert Cardulla: "...after purchasing the bus ticket, [Stanley] reveals to Stella everything he has learned about Blanche's 'recent history' in the belief that she will side with him against her sister."⁵ Stanley believed Stella would agree with him; however, she did not agree because she had sympathy for Blanche. Stella knew Stanley did not like Blanche, but Stella wanted Stanley to think of Blanche's feelings. However, Stanley did not listen to Stella, and he was always wanting Blanche to leave his apartment. When Stanley returned to his apartment from the hospital after bringing Stella there and he and Blanche were alone, he suddenly raped Blanche. Adler's explanation seems valid to me: "In forcing Blanche's expulsion, Stanley has, ironically, driven a wedge between himself and Stella, further fracturing the relationship he had hoped to protect."⁶ Stanley thought he would be happy if he could drive Blanche away from his apartment; on the other hand, Stella perhaps thought she would not be happy with him if he did. Yet when he lost his temper against Blanche, he suddenly had the desire to rape Blanche. Later, Blanche told Stella the situation. Perhaps the rape had somehow ruined his relationship with Stella. As a result, Stanley could not control not only Stella, but himself as well. At the end of the play after Blanche leaves, Stanley says to Stella, "Now, honey. Now, love. Now, now, love" (Sc 11.135.4-5).

IV. Stanley's Attitude to Blanche

We have seen that Mitch and Stella were victims of Stanley's power. Is this true of his attitude toward Blanche? Blanche came to Stanley's apartment from Laurel. Stanley met Blanche for the first time at his apartment, but he did not know that she would be coming on that day. At first, he behaved gently to her because she was the elder sister of his wife Stella. He said, "Be comfortable is my

motto" (Sc 1.20.18), and he suddenly started to drink whiskey and remove his shirt in front of Blanche. He looked at Blanche and said, "I'm afraid I'll strike you as being the unrefined type" (Sc 1.21.12-3). Judging from the situation, I felt that Stanley's attitude to Blanche was very normal, and he seemed to be very self-assured and strong. It even seemed to me that Stanley made Blanche relax.

However, Stanley's background was quite different from Blanche's. For example, Alvin B. Kernan makes a sharp comment on the differences between Stanley and Blanche: "We are presented in *Streetcar* with two polar ways of looking at experiences: the realistic view of Stanley Kowalski and 'non-realistic' view of his sister-in-law, Blanche DuBois."⁷ Of the differences in "light" between Stanley and Blanche, Griffin's comments are pertinent in this connection: "Light is one of the most prevalent symbols. Stanley's sole original metaphor is 'colored lights' for the sex he and Stella enjoy. Blanche's 'light' images are related to Allan, her first and only love...."⁸ In short, Stanley is realistic even though the colored lights during sex provide a romantic image; on the other hand, Blanche is really non-realistic, and she wants to live in a non-realistic world because she does not want to remember her past and because she does not want to show her real face to anyone. We might guess that Stanley and Blanche would not get along with each other because of these differences between them.

Moreover, when Stanley heard that Belle Reve was lost, Stanley's attitude to Blanche quickly started to change. He started to doubt Blanche because he thought that Blanche had sold Belle Reve and received much money from the sale. So he explained to Stella about the Napoleonic Code. Obviously he wanted more money even though he worked hard and earned much, for he had strong desire about everything. He further doubted Blanche due to her many dresses and accessories. If Blanche did not have much money, she would not have been able to buy these "jewels." Stanley thought Blanche was able to buy these things because she had sold Belle Reve, but Stella denied that, telling him her jewels were imitations and many men had given her gifts. Stanley could not believe that; moreover, he could not gain any money through poker. Stanley could not satisfy his strong financial desires, and he became upset. However, the most important desire for him is the sexual one. He really wanted to constantly have sex with Stella, but he could not because of Blanche's being in the next room. Also, because of that, he could not control Stella. In Scene Four, Stanley, outside the apartment, overheard Blanche's conversation with Stella about him. He did not show his anger, but later he thought Stella might believe Blanche's past in Laurel. As Griffin comments: "It is [Stanley's] desire for revenge as well as his wish to hold on to Stella which prompts him to investigate Blanche's past, where he finds more than even he suspected."⁹ Stanley wanted to have revenge against Blanche by throwing her out of his home.

First of all, Stanley started to use irony in talking to Blanche. Stanley learned

much information about Blanche in Laurel. Blanche had sex with many men in the Flamingo hotel, and she even had sex with a sixteen-year-old student in her class. The irony Stanley employed was "The Flamingo is used to all kinds of goings-on. But even the management of the Flamingo was impressed by Dame Blanche! In fact they was so impressed by Dame Blanche that they requested her to turn in her room-key—for permanently!" (Sc 7.87.12-6). Stanley learned Blanche was not a virtuous woman, so he told that to Stella and Mitch.

Stanley was also ironic in his behavior to Blanche. In Scene Ten, Stanley counterattacked because of Blanche's words about her telegram, because of Mitch, and because of being called "swine" and "common." Moreover, at Blanche's birthday party, Stanley gave Blanche a bus ticket back to Laurel as her birthday gift. He said to her, "Ticket! Back to Laurel! On the Greyhound! Tuesday!" (Sc 8.100.19-20). I think it was his most ironic action against Blanche, for she was so shocked she vomited in the bathroom.

The most important revengeful act against Blanche was Stanley's increasing violence against her. Earlier, at Blanche's birthday party, Stella told him to clear the table when Stanley, Stella, and Blanche had dinner together, and he behaved badly against Stella and Blanche. Stanley hurled a plate, saucer, and cup to the floor. The worst violence against Blanche was Stanley's suddenly raping Blanche at the end of this play. I think this was because Stanley wanted to complete his revenge against Blanche and also because he had not been able to satisfy his strong sexual desires for his wife, the most important desire in him. Nancy M. Tischler writes: "With Mitch gone and Stella away in the hospital having a baby, Stanley completes Blanche's annihilation by raping her."¹⁰ Stanley wanted to help Mitch and Stella, but did he? He did not want to help Blanche, but did he ruin himself in doing that?

Stanley always wanted to satisfy himself in several areas. But actually he did not have full control over Blanche, Stella, and even himself. He ended up being quite nervous. He was not confident at all. I think Stanley was sorry he had raped Blanche, and he was very disappointed in rethinking about what he had done. Later, Stanley did not know what to do for Blanche and Stella. He said to Blanche on her day of departure, "You left nothing here but spilt talcum and old empty perfume bottles—unless it's the paper lantern you want to take with you. You want the lantern?" (Sc 11.131.25-7). His words seemed to be ironic, but I think Stanley tried to turn his weak mentality into a strong one, for actually he was very nervous. At last, in the last scene of the play, Stanley was depending on Stella's help. Stanley gave in. Stanley's attitude to Blanche transformed him from being a self-assured, macho-person to one in decline.

IV. Conclusion

Stanley's attitudes to Mitch, Stella, and Blanche, as I have shown, underwent transformation. After all, Stanley's attitudes became quite weak. In the last scene he wanted Stella to help him, so he kneeled beside her and said sadly, "Now, honey. Now, love. Now, now, love." However, is the reader to think Stella would help Stanley? Stella perhaps knew Stanley had raped her elder sister Blanche. On her day of departure he said to Blanche, "You left nothing here but spilt talcum and old empty perfume bottles—unless it's the paper lantern you want to take with you. You want the lantern?" These words of Stanley are most symbolic of the changes in his attitudes. Stanley seems to be telling Blanche to leave his apartment. But his words "spilt talcum" and "old empty perfume bottles" mean that Stanley raped Blanche violently and that Blanche became mentally unbalanced because of his rape. Ironically because of Blanche, Stanley has changed; on the other hand, because of Stanley, Blanche has changed. Then because of the change between Stanley and Blanche, Stella and Mitch have also changed.

So who is the worst person in this play? Perhaps Stanley seems to be totally bad. In general, when people encounter a new tool, they tend to change it slightly in a good way or a bad way. For example, when we begin using a word processor, we are likely to use it instead of writing by hand. As we use it, we become poor in handwriting and tend to forget the *kanji* we want to write. On the other hand, when we have a good teacher, we are happy and perhaps study a little harder. That is natural.

However, it is a quite different change consciously or unconsciously when we meet someone personally. In *Streetcar*, Stanley acted not only consciously but instinctively. I think Stanley was especially twofold in his reactions to Blanche; that is, he consciously did things to her and he instinctively did things to her.

Stanley discovered Blanche's past in Laurel and repeated the information about her, and he gave her a bus ticket back to Laurel as her birthday gift. These are no doubt conscious acts. Stanley did not try to have sympathy with Blanche consciously. Of course, that was because Stanley could not have sex with Stella and could not satisfy his strong sexual desire after Blanche came to his apartment.

I also think his cruelty was because of his personality. Personality is often "unconscious." Stanley could be wild like an animal. That characteristic is part of his instinct. I think perhaps it was an "unconscious" act when he raped Blanche. He could not have sex after Blanche came to New Orleans, so he could not satisfy his sexual desire, and he needed to have sex. After Stanley took Stella to a hospital and then returned home, he was alone with Blanche. Suddenly, he instinctively wanted to have sex with Blanche. Of course, he really wanted to have revenge against Blanche. These two emotions were combined in his mind and his instincts and made him rape Blanche.

Thus perhaps we can say that Stanley is not totally bad in this play. Each person has good and bad aspects, so even Stanley has some good characteristics. For example, even if he used violence against Stella, he indirectly apologized to her and had sympathy for her; moreover, he took her to a hospital when she was expecting their child. Stanley and Stella had had a wonderful life before Blanche came. The most important problem he faced was that the relationship between Blanche and himself became increasingly worse. A conflict could not be avoided because their personalities were quite different. Finally, Stanley noticed that he had behaved badly to Blanche and Stella, so he reflected on it, and then he became less confident and perhaps more humane. However, it cannot be overlooked that Stanley raped Blanche. He is guilty of that illegal and terrible act. That is the law of society.

I think Stanley's complexity was reflected in the life situations Tennessee Williams himself had. Ronald Hayman comments:

In punishing [Blanche]... Tennessee is also punishing himself for his ambivalence toward homosexuality. The moralist rubs shoulders with the masochist. The violence that encroaches on so many of his plays stems from the same ambivalence. The insistent glorification of the body gets caught up in an uncontrolled undercurrent; Tennessee is simultaneously trying to affirm and deny himself. He subjects his surrogates to a tension that often breaks into exorbitant violence. In spite of himself he ferociously punishes the characters he would most like to protect, while punishing himself for his irresolution.¹¹

Tennessee was a homosexual, and that was part of his own complexity. He had strong desires for male sex and for more and more comfort. However, he did not know how to achieve these wishes. Williams wanted to express the conflict in his mind by using some characters instead of himself in the play and to release himself. Perhaps in the play the worst person is not Stanley or Blanche, but the writer Tennessee Williams himself.

Notes

1. Thomas P. Adler, *A Streetcar Named Desire: The Moth and the Lantern* (Boston: Twayne, 1990) 53.
2. Adler, 70.
3. Francis Donahue, *The Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1964) 35.
4. Alice Griffin, *Understanding Tennessee Williams* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1995) 65.
5. Bert Cardullo, "Drama of Intimacy and Tragedy of Incomprehension: *A Streetcar Named Desire* Reconsidered," in *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute*, ed. Jack Tharpe (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1997) 149.
6. Adler, 63.
7. Alvin B. Kernan, "True and Dramatic Mode in *A Streetcar Named Desire*," in *Tennessee Williams: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987) 9.
8. Griffin, 67-8.
9. Griffin, 58.
10. Nancy M. Tischler, *Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan* (New York: Citadel, 1961) 137.
11. Ronald Hayman, *Tennessee Williams: Everyone Else Is an Audience* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993) 110.

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