
Oppression, its brutality and its inescapability, is a dominant theme in literature

The brutality and inescapability of oppression is a dominant theme in literature as it is a key theme presented in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Williams calls for the reform of social constructs such as patriarchy in this play and brings to light modes of oppression in society, these include the physical and psychological brutality of oppression as well as the conformity and potential for escape.

The crescendo of violence in *A Streetcar Named Desire* portrays the physical brutality of oppression. The build-up of violence begins when Stanley “heaves the package”^[1] of meat at Stella in scene one. Even though this action is small and could be seen as insignificant, it gives the reader an insight into Stanley’s character as he appears careless but the little acts of physical violence add up to Stanley’s ultimate act of physical brutality at the end. Another time Stanley is physically violent is when he “gives a loud whack of his hand”¹ on Stella’s thigh in scene 3. Stanley is acting as though he owns his wife by the sexually possessive action of striking her thigh and treating her the way he wants to. His male dominance is reinforced by Stella’s ineffective response, she says “sharply: that’s not fun, Stanley, ”¹ while the laughter of the other men at the table that follows, only serves to further emphasize the passive role of women in the play. Yet, this was nothing compared to the physical violence Stella faced later on in this scene.

Stanley’s pent-up anger and irritation in this scene were soon released with the “sound of a blow”¹ and then it was obvious to the audience that the recipient was Stella from the fact that “Stella cries out”¹ in the stage directions that result in the blow. This act of violence not only exposes Stanley’s true character to the audience but it also reveals the downside to the lively vibrant life that was created by the atmosphere of the seemingly liberated New Orleans in the first scene. Therefore, Williams is highlighting that New Orleans is not what it seems and there are underlying problems such as the frequent violence and this foreshadows the violence that will continue throughout the play concluding in the rape of Blanche. However, some critics argue that Stanley is not cruel or violent and that the rape resulted from “Blanche’s licentious provocation”^[2]. This critic puts the blame on Blanche stating that she provoked Stanley to rape her. There is clear evidence that Stanley is violent especially towards Stella and even the rape itself is cruel and violent.

Stanley is presented as cruel through his psychological brutality. As soon as Stanley finds out the ‘truth’ about Blanche he proceeds to torment her for the rest of the play which leads her to

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insanity at the end of the play. His desire in finding out the truth stems from his mask of false virtue. In scene three this is evident when he searched through Blanche's belongings after Stella told him about Belle Reve. After assuming that Blanche sold it off, he uses the "Napoleonic code"¹ to act as though he is protecting Stella from being "swindled"¹ by her sister. However, the Napoleonic code favors him as he would get the money and so Stanley is using this code to assert his patriarchal power over Stella to claim Belle Reve as his own. So, when Stella is presented as the voice of compassion by Williams as she explains that the "diamonds"¹ on Blanches "crown"¹ (as Stanley states) are actually "rhinestones"¹ on a "tiara"¹, Stanley does not want to believe this as it would go against his fantasies. Yet again, in scene 5, Stanley acts as though he is trying to find out the truth about Blanche by mentioning "hotel Flamingo"¹ when what he really wanted to do was shame her and get revenge on her to uphold his male dominance. The audience is immediately made to feel sympathy for Blanche by Williams' use of dramatic irony.

The fact that Stanley now knows what the audience already knew, Blanche used to be a prostitute, makes the audience feel dread as we know that Stanley would use this information to harm her. Stanley only seeks factual truths rather than the psychological truth which is why, unlike the audience, he is unable to understand her. Williams is suggesting through Stanley that "all cruel people describe themselves as paragons of frankness"[3]. Stanley is not honest because if he was then he would tell the whole truth and not only get facts from other sources but also from Blanche herself. This can be seen in scene seven when he tells Stella about Blanche being a prostitute and getting "mixed up"¹ with a seventeen-year-old boy. As Stanley did not state that the only reason that happened was that Blanche was going through the trauma of her husband's death that happened when he was around that boy's age, shows that he was not telling Stella this out of his need of being truthful. This was also the case when he told Mitch this information, Stanley was acting as though he was being a good friend when in fact he only told Mitch to ruin Blanche's life with her one chance at happiness.

This brutality and oppression are only strengthened by the conformity of the characters in the play and in society as well which is what makes it inescapable. This conformity is seen after Stella is beaten by Stanley and the men are calm about it as if it is not out of the ordinary. Also, Eunice points out that this is not the first time Stanley has done this to Stella as she says that she hopes he gets locked up "same as last time"¹. This indicates that the violence is reoccurring and happens often. Even though this is the case, the scene ends with Stella going back to Stanley with her eyes going "blind with tenderness"¹. This suggests that the only reason it is reoccurring is that she allows it to happen and forgives him straight-away. The scene that follows this scene (scene 4) only further highlights this as Stella reminisces about her wedding day when Stanley smashed all the light bulbs. She normalizes his violence by telling Blanche that she was "thrilled by it"¹. By doing this, Stella excuses her oppressor and thus conforms to the oppression while allowing it to become a social norm. In scene nine Mitch also

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conforms to these societal norms as he begins to act like Stanley when he finds out that Blanche was a prostitute.

Mitch no longer has psychological truth but “just realistic”¹ truths, so he is unable to be compassionate towards Blanche when he hears about the death of her husband. Some critics believe that Blanche “delights” in “mocking”^[4] Mitch while he is unable to understand why she became a prostitute. However, this is not true because Blanche does not “delight” in explaining herself to Mitch. In fact, she feels disappointed in him for choosing to conform to the patriarchy. Lastly, in scene eleven, Stella again conforms to the oppression when she says that she “couldn’t”¹ believe Blanche about being raped and “go on living with Stanley”¹. Eunice reinforces this conformity by telling her to not “ever” believe it as “life has to go on”¹. This shows that life for these women is to live under the patriarchal rule even though there is an awareness of being powerless, they are forced to conform. This is part of the cycle of their lives and there is nothing the women can do about it.

Contrastingly, there are elements in the play where there is potential for the escape from oppression. This was first seen in Blanche as she did not conform to the oppression around her. She knew that it was the fault of the men and their “epic fornications”¹ that resulted in the loss of Belle Reve. Through Blanche, Williams is criticising patriarchy as in scene 2 Stanley seeks to find out the truth about Belle Reve and when Blanche reveals it to him he dismisses it. Blanche is able to show awareness of oppression as Williams establishes her as the truth teller. Williams shows that oppression is escapable as long as you have the critical insight and are able to expose it for what it is. Blanche is able to break away from the social norms that make being homosexual a crime. As she recounts her husband’s death in scene six to Mitch, she shows remorse for telling her husband, “You disgust me”¹ after finding out that he was homosexual.

The fact she felt guilt shows that she changed due to the death of her husband and no longer follows the social norms of the Antebellum South. Some critics believe that Blanche tells Mitch this revelation because he is “dull and simple”^[5] and she feels sorry for him. However, this is not the case, she tells Mitch because she values sincerity just as much as he does. Just like Blanche, Mitch is also escaping from the patriarchal society because at the beginning of the play he shows that he has the psychological truth which allows him to understand and sympathize with Blanche. Even though in scene nine Mitch lost this psychological truth he regained it in scene eleven when he blamed Stanley and his “god damn interfering with things”¹ on Blanche’s insanity. Williams decides to return Mitch to his compassion as his message to the audience and society is that there is still hope for change, Mitch represents this change. Williams calls for “the crying, screaming need of a great worldwide human effort to know ourselves and each other a great deal better...”^[6]. This would help society escape from the patriarchal oppression.

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Based on the ideas presented in this essay it is clear that the brutality and inescapability of oppression is a dominant theme in literature. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the physical brutality of oppression is apparent through the character of Stanley who uses his male dominance as a way to be violent towards the female characters. The crescendo of violence is at the first minute but it develops when Stanley hits Stella and then results in the rape of Blanche. The psychological brutality is seen through Stanley's mask of false virtue as he seemingly appears to seek the truth but when he is given the truth he dismisses it. Stanley only wants the truth where he exposes Blanche for being a prostitute and uses this to shame her instead of finding out the psychological truth about why she became a prostitute. This brutality is reinforced by the female characters conforming to the oppression. Deeming the patriarchal oppression as the natural cycle of life. However, Williams makes it clear to the audience that there is potential for change through the characters of Mitch and Blanche who challenge patriarchal oppression.

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