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It's Reigning Men: American Masculinity Portrayed Through Stanley Kowalski

“Be a man!” Popular culture shouts this seemingly innocent command at males of all ages. Throughout the twentieth century, both men and women experienced shocking changes to society's expectations of their gender norms. With the rise of the feminist movement during the twentieth century, women were able to leave the home and embrace the workforce. More opportunities opened up for women, such as factory jobs and secretary positions, making America's society more egalitarian between the sexes. On the other hand, after the trauma of WWII and the onset of the Cold War, men experienced a twist in society's expectations during the 1950s that resulted in an ideal man that very few men were logically able to achieve. An example of this ideal man would be the father figure in many TV shows produced in the 1950s, such as Theodore Cleaver in *Leave it to Beaver*. Theodore Cleaver exemplified the ideal man because he was the family's sole provider; he was not engaged in the family's business but spent his days working to support his middle-class lifestyle and appeared content with his life. While television shows provide great examples of the expectation of the time, perhaps in no other area is the change in masculinity more prevalent than in America's literature. Like Theodore Cleaver for television, there is one character in literature who stands out as a primary model for the shift in expectations in American manhood: Tennessee Williams' Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Stanley Kowalski is the type of man that helped lead America's society to cling

to the 1950s idealized, white, middle-class family; he paved the way from the selfish, pleasure seeking men of the 1940s to the family-man image of the 1950s.¹

One aspect of masculinity that makes it so intriguing for scholars is that, like all other areas of historical study, masculinity has a history. What people groups consider “manly” is a socially constructed notion, not an ingrained part of humans’ anatomy. America is no exception to the changes culture has placed on manliness. In his book *American Manhood*, E. Anthony Rotundo examines the changing ideas of masculinity in America from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. He explains how in the eighteenth century, manhood was “communal” (Rotundo 4). However, with the rise in a market economy and in the republican government, the late nineteenth century saw a shift to a “self-made manhood” (Rotundo 4). This manliness was based on the ability of a man to make something of himself and fully support his family. This idea lingered into the twentieth century, and was only recently replaced by a new “passionate manhood” (Rotundo 6). This *passionate* manliness placed a new emphasis on a males’ passion; another important factor for this view of masculinity was the expression of the self, either in hobbies or in the workforce. This image of a man being able to express himself and also enjoy his hobbies was the prevailing idea of masculinity until the tumultuous decade of the 1940s (Rotundo 6).

During the War, men were considered *men* if they suited up and went to fight. During the war years, American masculinity was very much defined by a man’s willingness to fight (Motl). After WWII, soldiers returned home to a prospering economy and ample job opportunity. After witnessing the destruction of the war in Europe, American soldiers returned home, used to

¹ At this time in American history, there was a large separation between white and black masculinity. For the purposes of this paper, when I refer to masculinity or manhood, I am only referring to white manhood during this era.

violence, and with a new zeal for life. There was a shift from the cry for violence as being what defined a man as a man, to a focus on fulfilling one's desires (Motl). These men very much embodied a *carpe diem* type mentality and sought to further the masculine tradition of fulfilling male passions. War veterans were not as preoccupied with being *manly* after facing death in the war, but were more concerned with living their lives the way they desired. This idea of a man acceptably pursuing his passions and pleasures was the dominant idea of American masculinity immediately following WWII (Motl). It was under the lenses of this passionate manliness when Williams brilliantly created Stanley Kowalski.

Stanley Kowalski's aggressive manliness is an added effect that helps make the play raw and relatable. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a play centered on some of society's most taboo topics. Tennessee Williams did not hold back when writing his play which addresses alcohol, rape, gambling, violence, and mental illness. The play has three primary characters: Blanche DuBois, Stella, and Stanley Kowalski. The setting is an apartment near the French Quarter in New Orleans with complex main characters that all have deeply rooted issues. One of the most intriguing and also one of the most famous is Stanley Kowalski. Stanley is a young, handsome, strong male who enjoys himself and all that New Orleans has to offer. In his stage directions, Williams writes:

Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women...branching out from this complete and satisfying center are all the auxiliary channels of his life, such as his heartiness with men, his appreciation of rough humor, his love of good drink and food and games, his car, his radio, everything that is his, that bears his emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer. (101)

From the beginning, the audience is given an image of Stanley as a passionate man: he is focused on pleasure and what he can gain. He possesses no gentle quality, nor does he feel it is appropriate for him to follow anyone else's expectations. He is violent, aggressive, domineering and passionate; he exemplifies the passionate new man.

The passionate men who dominated the 1940s soon gave way to the idealized 1950s father figure as the dominating view of masculinity. This was the decade in which the image of the white middle-class American family first appeared in the public eye. This was the prime era for the white picket fence, the dog, two children (one boy, one girl), a nice home, multiple cars, and a stay-at-home wife, as well as a hardworking husband who fulfilled all of the family's needs. The media was producing an overwhelming amount of advertisements that promoted this type of family as the poster-child for America; numerous television shows were created in this era reflecting the traditional American family, such as *Leave It to Beaver*, *I Love Lucy*, and *The Andy Griffith Show*. This image of the American family to model was the epitome of a patriarchal society that was obsessed with strict gender roles. Men were expected to grow up, marry a beautiful wife, and have children, move to the suburbs where they would spend their days commuting to a job in the city so they would be able to support their families. Michael Kimmel writes in his book, *Manhood in America*, "The suburbs had become a central fact of postwar America and the new arena for proving one's manhood" (236). The father was the dominant parent in the family, making the money and the choices. Men were the providers, protectors, and possessors. In order to *be a man* during the 1950s, men had to, in theory, achieve all of these goals. "What we like to remember as a simple time, 'happy days,' was also an era of anxiety and fear, during which ideas of normality were enforced with a desperate passion" (Kimmel 236). At a time when there were no acceptable alternatives to society's norms, any

attack on a man's masculinity left him scrambling to defend himself in any way possible, even if that defense was aggressive. Stanley Kowalski prides himself on being a real man; from the beginning of the play, any threats to emasculate him result in aggression.

We see this destructive behavior early on in the play; there is evident tension between Stanley and Blanche. Blanche refers to him as *common* and a *Polack* and an *animal*, all of which infuriate Stanley. By referring to him as common, Blanche insinuates that she and Stella are too good for Stanley. When she calls him a Polack it infuriates Stanley because Blanche suggests that he is less than they are simply because he was not born in America; the epithet Polack is so offensive because it implies one has a lesser nature and is overall, not as good as Americans. Finally, comparing Stanley to an animal deprives him not only of his masculinity, but also of his humanity. All three of these terms primarily lower him economically in the eyes of Blanche. Not only degrading him economically in her sight, she also questions his intelligence: "I'm sorry, but I haven't noticed the stamp of genius even on Stanley's forehead" (Williams 111). Blanche has already stripped him of his economic worth, now she rips away his intelligence. She emasculates him in every form she knows how. From the start, Stanley feels threatened by Blanche's presence because she is questioning the one thing in which he holds so much pride: his masculinity.

Because of Blanche's open attacks on his masculinity, Stanley feels the need to defend his manliness. According to an analysis over gender roles and television in the 1950s, the author writes, "Trying to over-fulfill one's manliness because of the fear of not being manly enough often times leads to violence" (*The Artifice*). In the Third Scene of *Streetcar*, Stanley has been playing poker with his friends all evening and is drunk; Stella and Blanche come back to turn on the radio. Stanley is frustrated, and commands they turn the radio off. Stella refuses, some words

are exchanged, and finally Stella calls him an animal. After this insulting comment, Stanley shoots up and proceeds to hit Stella. This is the only time in the play that Stanley blatantly hits his wife, and it is also the one time in the play that Stella calls him an animal. Stella calling her husband an animal is deeper than a crude insult; this is his own wife stripping him of his manliness. Stanley feels threatened by his wife's degradation of his manhood, thus causing him to lash out at her physically. After all, Stanley is a man; he considers himself higher than women and only does *manly* things.

Stanley is unashamedly aggressive, and he defends his manliness in multiple ways, one of them by refusing to participate in anything that is not traditionally *manly*. Another largely accepted norm of the time was that men were never allowed to do anything feminine (*The Artifice*). Stanley is only ever portrayed as drinking, gambling, bowling or working; he is not once gentle or meek or loving. As the play progresses, more often than not Blanche is telling her sister how animalistic Stanley seems based on his day-to-day behaviors and also how common he is; she exclaims at one point, "He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There's even something- sub-human- something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! Yes, something- apelike about him" (Williams 121). Stanley hears his wife's sister making these claims about him and licks his lips in response to Blanche's claims. The scene ends with Stella and Stanley embracing with Stanley smirking at Blanche over Stella's shoulder (Williams 122). These gestures directed at Blanche are a symbol of him subtly expressing his power over Blanche. The play goes on with Stanley making more moves to reclaim the masculinity which Blanche has stripped from him. Finally, he explodes: "Don't ever talk that way to me! "Pig-Polack-disgusting-vulgar-greasy!" –them kind of words have been on your tongue and your sister's too much around here...And I am the king around here, so don't

forget it!” (Williams 139). Here, Stanley demands the respect of his wife and her sister. He powerfully enforces his masculinity upon them. This is a sign of manliness because it is demanding, harsh, and it devalues women.

For Stanley and other WWII veterans, women were not held in high regard. From his first description to the final time the audience sees Stanley, Williams makes it clear that Stanley does not see women as valuable. His ultimate way to defend his masculinity is to assert his power both over Stella and Blanche throughout the play. Stanley’s dominance over Stella was determined when he hit her yet she returned to him quickly thereafter. His power over Blanche, however, is an ongoing struggle throughout the entire play. It is Blanche who poses the greatest threat to his masculinity, not Stella; it is Blanche who constantly belittles him and speaks to him using derogatory terms. While Stanley is the new passionate man returning from the war, Blanche represents the Old Southern ways: she is traditional in her thoughts and behavior. Blanche’s attacks on Stanley’s character irritate him even further because she does not understand his new way of life.

The final act of domination comes at the end of Scene Ten when Stanley carries Blanche offstage and rapes her. This is Stanley’s way of retaliating against all of the times she emasculated him. In the beginning of the scene, Stanley is kind to Blanche; he goes along with what she says though he knows she is lying. Quickly, however, Blanche catches on and feels uncomfortable. She asks him to not interfere with her, and in response, Williams directs that Stanley “...stares at her again, his mouth slowly curving into a grin” (149). Stanley continues to mock Blanche by saying, “Come to think of it- maybe you wouldn’t be bad to- interfere with...” (Williams 149). Stanley both mocks and intimidates Blanche in this scene; he releases all of his pent up anger towards her in this one act by depriving her of her femininity. For the final line of

the scene, Stanley says, “We’ve had this date with each other from the beginning!” (Williams 150). This is the most forceful act of dominance in the play because of the tension that was slowly rising since the beginning. It makes sense that his assertion of his manliness over Blanche is more forceful because she has been stripping his masculinity more boldly and consistently throughout the play. Blanche poses a threat to Stanley’s idea of manliness, causing him to react with extreme violence as a way to defend himself and in turn, reclaim his masculinity. Stanley’s era was one of strict gender roles and to prove one’s manhood was to devalue women (*The Artifice*).

When Stanley was at his physical peak, the War had just ended and most men were experiencing a restlessness of life after the excitement of the War. The end of the 1940s did not bring about the peace that America desired but instead, the onset of the Cold War. Stanley is a transitional literary figure because he represents a man who is determined to defend his masculinity at all costs; also, he is concerned with his selfish desires and passions. Because of the Communist thoughts that spread across the world during the 1950s, American men experienced the need to retreat to the suburbs like never before in order to promote the beauty of a Republican government. The 1950s were also a time when the norm of a strong man of the house and a happily submissive wife “still caused a certain cultural uneasiness inspired by an increasingly threatening fear of masculine decline” (Martschukat). More than ever before, millions of men were experiencing the pressure of defending their masculinity as well as defending their Republican Government values. American society was at its patriarchal peak and men did not have the option to let their manliness be robbed. *The Artifice* article, “Masculinity, Gender Roles, ...” describes, “violence against women is directly connected to hyper-masculine socialization.”

In sum, “manhood is learned, used, reinforced, and reshaped by individuals in the course of life” (Rotundo 7). What is considered *masculine* or what it takes to *be a man*” is determined by each individual society. During the 1940s, masculinity experienced a giant shift from provider to individual. With the coming of the Cold War and the 1950s, the American public responded more dramatically than ever by idealizing a family man and therefore, changing the course of masculinity. Stanley Kowalski is not the norm for what men were like during the late 1940s or 1950s; however, he is an example of a man during this era that desired his masculinity to be free from scrutiny. He is a transitional figure for two opposite views of masculinity. Tennessee Williams fully captured America’s ideal masculinity of the time by creating such a complex, aggressive, representative figure of the men of his era. Stanley is a powerful character because of his physical power but also because of his determination to maintain what society told him was manly, and therefore, accepted. Stanley desires pleasure with women, devalues women, and commands women to view him as a man; he is reigning in *A Streetcar Named Desire* by abusing those around him and commanding recognition as a true American man.

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