

POWER STRUGGLE IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*: A FOUCAULDIAN ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY

*Abstract: Turning interpersonal relationships to a battlefield, Williams's plays display a constant power struggle which originates from the domineering characters' desire to retain their position of the Same and to push those whom they consider as inferior to the place of the Other. Foucault (1994), considering power as a possibility of an action upon action, defines it as a relationship among two or more entities maneuvering for position and advantage. Moreover, he, having the eighteenth and nineteenth century clinics and asylums in mind, proposes such binary oppositions as healthy/ sick, law-abiding/ criminal, and sane/ mad and maintains that in power relationships those who want to keep their power position intact use the inferior center, such as madness, of such opposing centers as a label to suppress the voice of their opponents. The present research aims at analyzing Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* in the light of Foucault's ideas of power and madness. The main conclusion drawn from the study is that Stanly Kowalski, as a representative of the privileged in the binary opposition of man/ woman and apparently the superior center in the binary opposition of sane/ mad wins the battle over power with Blanche DuBois, his sister-in-law, by using madness as a label for Blanche leading to her being taken to an asylum where she can no longer disrupt his power position.*

*Key-words: Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire, Foucault, power struggle, madness, the Same, the Other*

The world of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a thorough embodiment of a patriarchal society in which women are forced to fight for their own rights but ironically enough such struggle for increased power finally leads to their marginalization and isolation which hints how a male-dominated society works against the rights of women while it gives the whole privilege to men who will do everything to keep their power position intact.

In the plays of Tennessee Williams interpersonal relationships are a battlefield. There is always a war between the characters in his plays, a war which is fought between those who are dominant and those who desire increased control; it is a war for power. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* we confront this power struggle between the two characters Blanche DuBois and her brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski.

There is a constant display of power on the part of Stanley especially after overhearing the conversation between Blanche and Stella when Blanche calls Stanley an "ape-like" figure. Winchell asserts that "Stanley is unquestioningly the king of his castle" (22). As a traveling salesman, he has freedom in his job. At home he has his obedient wife who tries to satisfy him by all means; he even plays poker in the middle of his apartment. Thus, "the Kowalski household embodies a patriarchal vision of home as heaven." (409) Stanley, especially after overhearing the conversation between his wife, Stella, and her sister, looks at Blanche as a likely threat for his domain where he, up to now, has had thorough control. It is from this very point onward that a constant power struggle between Blanche and Stanley begins. Berlin, talking of this power struggle, mentions that Stanley and Blanche constantly compete with each other and try to gain control over the situation. They compete "for the possession of Stella, for the affection of Mitch; they share bottle of whiskey; they dress and undress in

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the view of others; they both wish to occupy the bathroom" (99). Both these two characters try to gain control and are, therefore, naturally set at odds against each other. Hence, the present paper sets to investigate Williams's *Streetcar* and its characters' fight for power through Foucault's theories of power and madness.

Foucault defines power as "a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action." (qtd. in Smart 133) To put it plainly, Foucault considers power as "the name for conditions of possibility for 'an action upon action.'" (1992: 131-2) This is what we see in the power struggle between Blanche and Stanley in *Streetcar*; that is, one acts and the other reacts. If Blanche tries to take control of the situation by influencing Stella, Stanley tries to undo her deeds by destroying the story she has made, through revealing her past to her sister and her lover, and saying that Blanche "primarily relates to men by flattery and flirtation" and has had innumerable sexual relationships with many young men around (Wilhelmi 95).

*Streetcar* focuses, as Foucault does, on the struggle to control the Same and the Other. Stanley, as an agent of the Same, confronts Blanche as a "troublemaker" or as an outsider, Foucault's the Other, who disrupts the normal social order (Kleb qtd. in Zak 59). He tries to keep his power and keep the definition of the Same intact in whatever way possible, even by revealing Blanche's past and destroying her story.

Blanche's struggle to confront Stanley is a helpless one. The reason is that her struggle is the struggle of a woman against a man in a patriarchal society. *Streetcar*, as a matter of fact, depicts women's unfavorable position in a patriarchal society. Through the example of Blanche in this play, Williams portrays individual female characters who struggle to achieve their individuality but lack the "power to influence their communities" (Sample 1-4). Williams tries to address such important issues as "the marginalization and oppression of women by a male patriarch through his character of Blanche DuBois and the isolation, alienation, and search for identity that result" (Vaughn 46).

The role-relationships between a man and a woman are strictly defined in a male-dominated society. Unlike Blanche who struggles for a change, Stella has passively accepted these role-relationships. Stanley, for instance, physically abuses Stella after she calls him a "drunk-animal thing" (45) in order to put her back in her place. But Stella, knowing that she is pregnant and without any means of support, if there were no Stanley, she goes back to him after he calls for her. This act shows how much power Stanley has over Stella and "how much abuse she will accept to retain the security" (Vaughn 68) that she needs. Moreover, Stella explains the wedding night when he "smashed the lightbulbs with her slipper" (57) and that she was "thrilled by it" but she has accepted it as a part of his "temperament". She considers Stanley's behavior as "typical of men" (Vaughn 69). As Adler maintains, Stella is

content to live in a world defined by males and their social rituals, to be called 'the little woman' and to trot along behind the men and watch them bowl, to countenance, up to a point, their card playing and loud drinking because of what will happen later in the bedroom. Even verbal and physical abuse do not keep Stella away from Stanley. (61)

Blanche is surprised by Stella's attitude towards her situation and by the fact that she, without any resistance, has accepted all this demeaning and violent behavior towards her. She tries to find a way for both herself and Stella out of this situation:

Blanche: Your fix is worse than mine is! Only you are not being sensible about it. I'm going to *do* something. Get hold of myself and make myself a new life! [...] But you've given in. And that isn't right, you're not old! You can get out. [...]

Stella: I'm not in anything I have a desire to get out of. [...] People have got to tolerate each other's habits, I guess. (Williams 73-4)

Blanche struggles to assert both her own and her sister's individuality and identity. This is while Stella is a means for Stanley to assert his masculinity and his dominance; hence, Blanche is a threat in the way of asserting his masculinity. (Vaughn 61)

Adler goes with this idea believing that Stanley has acted as the "king" of his "domain" but his total control over this "domain" is threatened by Blanche's coming. Blanche's pretensions to refinement and gentility, for instance, serves as a criticism to his rough behavior and can remind Stella, one of his "loyal subjects," of what she has been able to provide her in return. That is one of the reasons for which Stanley looks at Blanche's arrival as "an invasion and threat to the absolute control he exercises over his territory" (51). It is here that the quest for power between these two characters becomes more tangible.

This state of Blanche's and Stanley's search for power goes with Foucault's idea of power. Foucault considers power as "the relationship between two or more entities. Within this relationship, entities struggle and maneuver for position and advantage" (Mills 34). Moreover, he defines power as the "capacity of powerful agents to realize their will over the will of powerless people" (Mills 35). This is what we see not only in *Streetcar* but in most of Williams's plays. The dominant characters in his plays impose their will upon other characters, whom they consider as inferior, in order to keep the current power position intact (Wilhelmi 2). In *Streetcar*, Stanley, in opposition to Blanche who tries to "defend herself by taking control of the Same to reconstitute her Otherness as Sameness," tries to keep his power position and "defend his control of the Same" by imposing his will upon Blanche and reaffirming her Otherness (Kleb qtd. in Zak 60-3).

Stanley's search for power and dominance and for reaffirming women as the Other is exhibited in different ways from the beginning of the play. The play opens with a scene in which Stanley appears carrying a package of meat which he "tosses to Stella." This act "establishes Stanley as the dominant male in the play" from the beginning. He also shows his dominance by removing his shirt in front of Blanche, who considers this act as indecent but is forced to accept it (Vaughn 58). Furthermore, the description of Stanley in the first scene serves to establish him as the dominant power in the play and also to portray him as a character who tries to bring women under his own control in "demeaning ways" (Sample 8). He looks at women only as sex objects which he can easily bring under control.

He is of medium height, about five feet eight or nine, and strongly, compactly built. Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and pride of a richly featured male bird among hens. [...] The gaudy seed-bearer sizes women up at a glance, with sexual classifications, crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them. (Williams 25)

In another part of the play after Blanche's arrival, Stanley thinks that Stella, calling him "a pig" and ordering him to wash his "disgustingly greasy hands" feels superiority under the influence of Blanche's superior air. Hence, he tries to assert his superiority and power by smashing his plate on the floor as an act of disapproval and domination (Williams 131).

[He seizes her arm] Don't ever talk that way to me! Pig-Polack-disgusting-vulgar-greasy!-them kind of words have been on you tongue and your sister's too much around here! What you two think you are? A pair of queens? Remember what Huey Long said- 'Every Man is a King!' And I am the king around here, so don't forget it. (Williams 131)

Stanley tries to confirm his hierarchy through using violence; he thinks that he "has properly put the women in their place as his subjects who live under his rule and must obey his edicts." (Vaughn 82) Adler, arguing on this point, maintains that Stanley tries to confirm his authority through physical violence. "He is a smasher, not only of objects but of people; he becomes increasingly violent as the play proceeds" (53).

Another picture of this male dominance, control, and power could be traced in the third scene, "The Poker Night," where men are described as being at "the peak of their physical manhood, coarse and direct and powerful as the primary colors" (Adler 58) they have on. For these men, this game, in which "competition, aggressiveness, and finally domination are the rules," is a way of asserting their

masculinity and a proof of their machismo (Adler 58). In this scene, the presence of other men along with Stanley's being drunk allows him to intensify his violence in order to maintain his domination over women and over the situation. Stanley tries to show his power and dominance through "ordering women around and slapping Stella on the thigh like she was a common barmaid" (Vaughn 66). Stella is angry at this display of male authority and objects to her being viewed merely as a sexual object for Stanley; she says "it makes me so mad when he does that in front of people" (Vaughn 66). But this is one of the things which she has chosen to "tolerate." Stanley's household is filled with sex; it serves as a good example of a house which "conforms to the societal norms of male dominance, the objectification of women" (Henry 31).

In *Streetcar* one confronts a society which gives importance to "competition, material success, aggressiveness-" (Rigney qtd. in Vaughn 48-9) characteristics which we see in the game of poker and which is "considered to be essentially masculine and, therefore, discouraged in women." In such a society "femininity becomes a negative quality" (Rigney qtd. in Vaughn 48-9) and women become only as objects in the hands of the more powerful, that is, men. Therefore, the play could be considered as a reflection of a patriarchal society which "devalues women" (Rigney qtd. in Vaughn 48-9) and undermines them to the status of a mere object.

Furthermore, such a society represses women in whatever way possible. Blanche, for instance, in order to escape her odious past, makes a false story and lives in a world of dream. This world is a representative of her idea of what the world 'ought to be.' But her dream world cannot survive in Elysian Fields which is the "representation of the society which represses her 'story'" (Zak 56-8). This society is what Blanche refers to at the first moments of her appearance: "'They' told me to take a streetcar named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at—Elysian Fields!" (Zak 56-8). This 'they' seems to be a "force or entity that controls her movement;" (Zak 56-8) it is an agent of patriarchy in a society in which the "stories" of such people as Blanche are not acceptable and are, therefore, repressed. Blanche is a captive in this society, as she implies in her song which she sings in the bathtub: "From the land of the sky blue water/ They brought a captive maid" (Zak 56-8); this captive is told to take a streetcar named Desire, constructed by 'they,' whom Stanley is a representative of, to Elysian Fields where they will do everything to crush down her dreamland.

Besides crushing down her 'story,' such a male-dominated society will take any step necessary to put women back in their places; they even use violence for this purpose. Foucault believes that establishing power relationships does not exclude the use of violence as an instrument (788-9). Moreover, within a heterosexual environment where a woman is defined by her sexual roles, violence against women always involves the threat of sexual violence. The reason is that in such a system women "always bear the mark and meaning of their sex, which inscribes them within a cultural hierarchy" as a "weaker object vulnerable to a stronger subject" (Dolan 63). Furthermore, if a male is to assert his superiority, he needs a weaker inferior whom he can dominate and manipulate; men ordinarily confirm their power "through physical means" (78). This is exactly what could be found in Stanley whom Blanche, while describing her fear of him, considers as her "executioner:" "The first time that I laid eyes on him I thought to myself, that man is my executioner! That man will destroy me" (Vaughn 57). Stanley is an "embodiment of male machismo" who enforces "the laws of the male patriarchy through sexuality and, where necessary, force" (Vaughn 58).

As Bean maintains, in a male-dominated environment "anxieties over power and gender are relieved through physical often sexualized violence" (112). Therefore, Blanche's downfall serves as an example of how sex is "used in Western society to institute technologies of power;" what Stanley, who both sexually and mentally violates Blanche, does is an attempt to assert his power and dominance and to keep "the patriarchal power structure intact" (Sample 6). The agents of the Same, Stanley and his friends, do not hesitate on committing any act necessary to protect the Same against the Other. Such an attitude towards power on the part of Stanley results in the conversion of Blanche "from an exploding symbol of Unreason to a contained sign (the rape is the signifying act)" (Kleb qtd. in Zak 69).

Therefore, it is a set of gender issues that lie behind the physical violence against women. A woman on stage, playing a role in front of a man, becomes a "(potential) victim of masculine

aggression" (Bean 110) to be sacrificed by the aggressive behavior, mostly physically aggressive, which "patriarchy reserves for men" (Bean 110). Thus, violence imposed by a male character on a female one exposes "ideological attitudes towards gender roles" (Bean 110). This is what we see in *Streetcar*; Williams's play portrays complicated explorations of gender issues. It reflects the reality of American society during 1940s and 1950s when women were forced to adhere to strict gender norms. Blanche desires a change and, for this purpose, she undergoes a struggle for power with Stanley but in this quest for authority it is Stanley who is the winner because he "benefits from staying within the parameters set for him by his sex" (Vlasopolos 336-7). Besides, "the biological difference between male and female physical strength and a history of violence" against (111) women in a patriarchal society underwrite Blanche's interaction with Stanley and "points to rape as a final outcome" (112). The scene of rape unmasks violence involved in victimization; that is, victimizing Blanche by Stanley's, as representative of patriarchy's, historical discourse.

Bean believes that depiction of women on stage relies on a "heterosexist notion of gender as a binary construct" (113) in which men and women function as opposites and take oppositional positions. These binary oppositions reflect "cultural stereotypes of gendered behaviors: active male/passive female; strong/ weak; subject/ object; dominant/ submissive" (113). Looking at gender in such binary oppositions becomes "the basis for unequal status of the sexes." The picture of characters in *Streetcar*, women as weak and passive *objects* and men as strong overpowering *subjects* as explained before, goes with gender expectations of a male and female, which is seen in the already mentioned binary oppositions, in a patriarchal society (Henry 18).

Furthermore, there are traces of another binary construct in the world of *Streetcar*. As in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the clinics worked by dividing people into categories of categories of sick/ healthy, criminal/ law-abiding, mad/sane and "lumped all those confined together in order to protect society" (qtd. in Zak 60) so in Elysian Fields 'they' confine Blanche as the 'mad' Other in order to protect the Same. Kleb believes that the madness or the 'Unreason' of those who are confined is an "all encompassing term for otherness-anything and everything that threatened the Same" (qtd. in Zak 61-3). In a misogynistic or patriarchal society the concept of *madness* is used only as a *label* in order to keep the dominant order and preserve women's position as outsider.

Misogyny makes women mad either through naming us as the "Other," through reinforcing the phallogocentric discourse, or through depriving women of power, privilege and independence. Or misogyny causes us to be named as mad. [...] Labeling us mad silences our voices. We can be ignored. The ranting of a mad woman is irrelevant. Her anger is impotent (Ussher 7). Such rejection of women's anger through labeling it as madness protects male society from critical scrutiny.

Foucault also, talking of madness, maintains

The history of madness would be the history of the Other- of that which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded (so as to exorcize the interior danger) but by being shut away (in order to reduce its otherness); whereas the history of the order imposed on things would be the history of the Same- of that which, for a given culture, is both dispersed and related, therefore, to be distinguished by kinds and to be collected together into identities. (xxiii)

Foucault believes that society tries to "confine the Other lest it should contaminate the social order" (Maiman 3). That is why Blanche, by being labeled as mad, is taken away, by 'they,' as agents of the Same, to an asylum where she can no longer disrupt the society dominated by such male figures as Stanley Kowalski.

Blanche undergoes several power struggles with men all her life and these men as "cruel forces" force her into failure and isolation. In this last struggle Blanche is also forced into failure this time by Stanley, as the defender of the Same. The fact that Stella chooses not to believe her sister and to continue her life with Stanley proves this idea. After Stanley's attack as a drunk against Stella in "The Poker Night," Blanche hopes to find something of an "ally" in her sister but this does not happen and Stella chooses to live as wife and mother in Stanley's household. Stella thinks that through her marriage to Stanley, whom she considers as a survivor, she has escaped Blanche's fate. Vaughn

believes that "Stella supports the patriarchy and is allowed to survive as Stanley's wife; Blanche is destroyed because she cannot find her identity or role in the patriarchy and is slowly forced into marginalization" (93). Blanche, even in her own family, loses the power struggle with men and fails to take control of the Same; "her otherness has been firmly re-established and continued" (Zak 69). She is rejected even by her sister and is thrown to a place, the mental hospital, where she will not "cause disturbances" (Zak 71).

Hence, the ending of the play could be seen as upholding Stanley's traditional male authority. Blanche's fate, as a matter of fact, is a critique of what most women are doomed to confront when they search for an increased control in a male-dominated society where all the power and control is in the hands of males who would do everything just to keep their power and position intact. In spite of all struggle that women undergo in such a society, they are forced into marginalization so that they would not make any troubles for the dominant power structure prevailing in the society.

'*Streetcar* there goes on a constant power struggle among the two main characters', Blanche and Stanley. In this power struggle, which, to use Foucault's words, takes place in the form of an action upon action, the two characters maneuver for position and advantage. But before anything there is a set of gender issues and ideological attitudes towards gender roles that dominate such power struggles between men and women in a patriarchal society. In such male-dominated environments, anxieties over power and position are relieved through physical often sexualized act of violence, which patriarchy reserves for men, towards those whom they have considered inferior throughout the whole history of patriarchy. The agents of the Same, Stanley and his friends, do not hesitate on taking any action to protect what Foucault calls the Same against the Other. They would do anything to retain the position of the Same, Stanley, and push those whom they consider as inferior, Blanche, to the place of the Other. That is why Blanche, as a woman who plays a challenging role in front of a man, becomes the victim of masculine aggression and is sacrificed by the aggressive behavior on the part of Stanley as representative of patriarchy. Therefore, a history of violence against women in a patriarchal society underwrites Blanche's interaction with Stanley. Stanley uses violence as an instrument, which points to rape as a final outcome, to crush down Blanche's story. Having turned Blanche from an exploding symbol of female power to a contained sign through the signifying act of rape, Stanley now uses madness as a label for Blanche leading to her being taken to an asylum where she can no longer disrupt his power position.

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