

A Streetcar Named Desire - a critical discussion of the rape scene

Francis Gilbert discusses the rape scene in A Streetcar Named Desire.

Does the rape scene in A Streetcar Named Desire ultimately spoil the play? Is it even necessary? Warner Brothers, who produced the famous film version of the play in 1951, wanted to have it cut out entirely; the studio felt that it was in poor taste and not suitable for a family audience.

Tennessee Williams and the film's director, Elia Kazan, eventually won the case for including the rape but had to change the ending of the play as a result: Stanley Kowalski, the rapist, had to be punished. The film ends with the impression that Stella, Kowalski's wife, is going to take their baby and leave the brute. However, a new print of the film, the 'director's cut' brought out on video in 1994, suggests that Stella's abandonment of Stanley is only temporary.

Were Williams and Kazan right in fighting for the rape's inclusion? Many critics think so. From the moment Blanche Dubois steps off the streetcar named desire into the bleak, ironically named Elysian Fields and discovers that her younger sister, Stella, has married a grunting, virile Polack, it seems clear that some sort of awful confrontation is going to occur.

Blanche is the complete opposite of Kowalski. She is an ageing beauty: cultured, alone, stripped of her money, work and property; self-deluding, obsessed with taking baths, uninterested in the ordinary things of life, blessed with an amazing imagination and a poetic, frequently fantastical, view of the world. Stanley Kowalski, on the other hand, is young, working class, gainfully employed, relatively well-off compared with Blanche, obsessed with consumption (he is constantly putting things in his mouth!), brutally down-to-earth, coarse, often dirty and sweaty and deeply resentful of the hold that Blanche has over her sister.

The only things the two of them have in common is that they have strong sexual appetites and enjoy being in control. Kowalski uses his violent temper and impulsive manner to establish mastery over people – he is a bully – while Blanche has in the past used her looks and eloquence to persuade people to do what she wants.

The brilliance of the play lies in the way in which the battle of wills between Kowalski and Blanche pans out: no one entirely gains our sympathy or 'wins' until the final two scenes. Williams deliberately makes Blanche seem irritating to the audience at the beginning of the play and then gradually shows us that it is Kowalski who deserves our condemnation towards the end. Williams wrote to Kazan during rehearsals of the first production: "There are no 'good' or 'bad' people... It is a tragedy with the classic aim of producing a catharsis of pity and terror and in order to do that, Blanche must finally have the understanding and compassion of the audience. This without creating a black-dyed villain in Stanley."

But surely isn't this what the rape scene does? How could an audience have any sympathy for

Kowalski after he has committed such a terrible crime? He becomes the 'black-dyed villain' that Williams wanted to stop him from becoming. Or does he?

When the first audiences watched the play in 1947 and the film in 1952, both Kazan and Williams were horrified by the real sympathy that people felt for Stanley Kowalski. Many sided with him. This was partly because rape, within certain contexts, was perceived to be more acceptable than it is today. The reasoning went something like this: Kowalski was white (rape by a black man was an entirely different thing!), a working, family man who was pushed to the end of his tether by Blanche's unbalanced and neurotic antics; he had to assert his control over her in some fashion. Maybe rape wasn't the best way to do it but it was understandable. The other reason for the audience's sympathy for Stanley was Marlon Brando's stunning performance; he made Kowalski's violence and impetuosity seem sexy and yet vulnerable.

Fifty years later many audiences feel very differently. Rape within families is viewed as intolerable and criminal, and Brando's performance, while still powerful, doesn't have its original impact.

In order to redeem Stanley, some critics have sought to show that the rape was as much Blanche's fault as Kowalski's. Modern critic Felicia Hardison Londré writes: "From Stanley's point of view, it is Blanche who provokes the attack, first when she imagines a threat where none had existed, virtually planting the suggestion that he might 'interfere with' her, and then when she smashes a bottle in order to 'twist the broken end in your face!' This is a challenge he cannot ignore."

Here we run into a problem that so many academics encounter when discussing Williams' play: they look too closely at the language without thinking hard enough about the staging of the scene. The staging of the rape scene is critical in showing who is to blame for the rape.

Williams' stage directions are very expressionistic: "Lurid reflections appear on the walls around Blanche. The shadows are of a grotesque and menacing form..."

The grotesque shadows are expressions of how Blanche is feeling; her internal turmoil is reflected in the external world. These expressionistic stage directions implicitly tell the audience that the rape is almost a nightmarish fantasy of Blanche's. While they seem superficially to enhance the horror of the rape, in fact they detract from it because they make the whole event seem, to a certain degree, a figment of Blanche's imagination. Kazan realised this and decided to tone down the expressionistic elements in the scene, replacing the lurid shadows with very real violence on Stanley's part: he sweeps the rhinestone tiara off Blanche's head and tosses it upstage as she flees from him in terror. Under Kazan's direction Stanley is entirely culpable and Blanche is the total victim. Kazan attempted to soften Stanley's character not by toning down the rape scene but by making him appear guilty in the next scene. Rather than sitting passively at the poker table, Stanley answers the door and speaks to the doctor in a contrite fashion.

This is why *A Streetcar Named Desire* remains such a disturbing and troubling play even today. The rape scene is crucial to the play; it can't be cut out or toned down. The play shows that ordinary, handsome, family men like Stanley can be rapists and that, while their behaviour is sickening, too often they get away with it and usually evince some sympathy in the process.

Kazan said as he was directing the play: "Every bar in the nation is full of Stanleys ready to explode." We all know men like Stanley Kowalski; men who commit terrible crimes but who appear to be normal. *A Streetcar Named Desire's* brilliance as a play is that it shows us that normality is terrifying.

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