

Stella's Strength

In Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stella's character is often overlooked due to the dominating elements of Stanley and Blanche's characters. Stanley's controlling behavior and Blanche's wildly unpredictable psychosis tend to draw the reader's attention away from Stella's character. When Stella's character is looked at closely, the reader finds a strong person who is able to adapt to any situation. Stella is a prime example of Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest. The reader witnesses Stella overcome life's obstacles when others break down or lose their composure. Stella continually perseveres and overlooks inevitable inconveniences in life. She stays positive and constant in her pursuit of survival and her piece of the American dream.

As the reader studies *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the natural tendency is to focus on the struggle between the dominating forces of Stanley and Blanche's personalities. It is easy to overlook Stella's character as weak, a supporting character to mediate the battle between her husband and her sister. She complements both Blanche and Stanley's characters because she is not outwardly attention seeking or forward. Given her modest role in the play, it can be argued that Stella is controlled by both Stanley and Blanche. Stanley hits her the night of the poker game and it is suggested that it is not the first time that it has happened. Stella could be perceived as a victim staying in a relationship out of fear and plagued by a crazy sister.

The main argument that can be made against the strength of Stella's character is that she is controlled by Stanley. This is reinforced mainly by his actions in Scene Three when he hits Stella during the poker night. We find out that this is not the first time that it has happened when Eunice tells Stanley, "I hope they do haul you in and turn the fire hose on you, same as the last time!" (3; 2209). Despite this incident, Stella does not behave throughout the play like she is afraid of Stanley. Her first line in the play, "Don't holler at me like that. Hi, Mitch." (1: 2187) is in itself defiance toward Stanley. Not only does she order him how to address her, but she does it in front of Stanley's friend Mitch. We also see an act of defiance in front of several of Stanley's friends just prior to the incident of abuse on poker night when Stella tells Stanley, "This is my house and I'll talk as much as I want to!" (3; 2204). When Blanche first arrives to New Orleans and is speaking to Stella about her

husband, she tells Blanche that she has not even told Stanley that Blanche is coming indicating that she makes her own decisions without her husband controlling her.

As Stella is speaking to her sister, she also says that she loves Stanley and they discuss how attracted she is to him. Stella states to Blanche, “Oh, you can’t describe someone you’re in love with!” She goes on discussing the fact that he travels and states that “When he’s away for a week I nearly go wild!” (1: 2192). Stella’s explanation of Stanley to Blanche reveals that she loves him and that she is attracted to him sexually to the point that it drives her “wild” when he is away. Even after the abuse that she sustains on poker night Stella returns to the apartment with Stanley and Mitch reassures Blanche that “There’s nothing to be scared of. They’re crazy about each other.” (3; 2209). The next morning when Stella is speaking to Blanche she tells her that she is making a big deal out of nothing suggesting that she is not afraid of Stanley. She also defends her husband by saying, “when men are drinking and playing poker anything can happen.” (4; 2210). She goes on to admit that Stanley smashed the light bulbs on their wedding night and it excited her. Because of her acts of defiance and her love and animal attraction for Stanley, Stella appears as a character that is not controlled by her husband at all, but rather smitten by him and his charm despite his flaws.

The argument that Stella is controlled by her sister Blanche can come from the several times that we see her cater to her sister with alcohol and sodas. However, Stella is aware of her sister’s declining mental state and tries to accommodate her. Blanche is overwhelmed by the differences between Belle Reve and New Orleans and Stella is aware that she herself has changed into something that Blanche does not understand. Stella is protecting Blanche from Stanley throughout the play. We see this when Stanley begins going through Blanche’s trunk, accusing her of spending all of the money from Belle Reve on clothing and jewelry. Stella even insults Stanley and points out his lack of intelligence:

STELLA Don’t be such an idiot Stanley!

[He hurls the firs to the day bed. Then he jerks open a small drawer in the trunk and pulls up a fistful of costume jewelry.]

STANLEY And what have we here? The treasure chest of a pirate!

STELLA Oh, Stanley!

STANLEY Pearls! Ropes of them! What is this sister of yours, a deep-sea diver?

Bracelets of solid gold, too! Where are your pearls and gold bracelets?

STELLA Shhh! Be still, Stanley!

STANLEY And diamonds! A crown for an empress!

STELLA A rhinestone tiara she wore to a costume ball.

STANLEY What’s rhinestone?

STELLA Next door to glass. (2; 2198).

This protection of her sister against Stanley shows how much she loves Blanche and it indicates that she is aware that Blanche is having problems that she has not come to understand yet. Stella comments to Blanche more than once throughout the play concerning the number of baths that she takes to relax. Stella attempts to make formal accommodations for Blanche so that she does not feel so uneasy away from home. She tells Stanley that she is “taking Blanche to Galatoire’s for supper and then to a show, because it’s your poker night.” She goes on to explain “I’m going to try to keep Blanche out till the party breaks up because I don’t know how she would take it. So we’ll go to one of the little places in the Quarter afterward and you’d better give me some money.” (2; 2196).

Despite all of these accommodations, Stella is not afraid to tell Blanche when she feels that she is wrong which indicates that she is simply protecting her sister, not being controlled by her. Blanche is discussing coming to New Orleans on the streetcar and Stella says to her:

STELLA Haven’t you ever ridden on a street car?

BLANCHE It brought me here. – Where I am not wanted and where I’m ashamed to be...

STELLA Then don’t you think your superior attitude is a bit out of place?

This dialogue between Stella and Blanche shows Stella’s frustration with her sister’s attitude toward Stanley, her home, and her way of life. She is torn between protecting her sister during her difficult time and fighting back because she is being insulted and so is the man that she loves. Stella is aware that Blanche feels that Stanley is “common” and she tells Stanley that Blanche “wasn’t expecting to find us in such a small place. You see I’d tried to gloss things over a little in my letters.” (2; 2196). She tries to protect Blanche from the truth that she knows she is too weak to handle but she draws the line with her sister when she feels insulted. Stella does her best to understand and help Blanche but by the end of the play she has made the decision to have her sister institutionalized. She packs Blanche’s bags for her and tells Eunice that she told Blanche, “we’d made arrangements for her to rest in the country. She’s got it mixed in her mind with Shep Huntleigh.” (11; 2243). She goes on to tell Eunice:

STELLA I don’t know if I did the right thing.

EUNICE What else could you do?

STELLA I couldn’t believe her story and go on living with Stanley. (11; 2243).

This shows that despite the accusations against Stanley, Stella has taken control of the situation. She second guesses her decision because she loves her sister but ultimately sides with her husband and has Blanche committed. Stella’s ability to follow through with this bold action shows her protective nature toward her husband and her new child. Stella wants

to help her sister but ultimately makes the decision that her family needs her protection more and packs Blanche's bags for the institution.

Seeing Stella as a victim is difficult due to her strength and ability to adapt and change. Stella has evolved from a delicate background to being able to live in New Orleans. She has moved on from having things done for her to doing them for herself in order to survive. Stella's ability to adapt comes up several times when Blanche first arrives at the apartment. Blanche compares the apartment to something that Edgar Allan Poe could only describe and Stella replies "Aren't you being a little intense about it? It's not that bad at all! New Orleans isn't like other cities." (1; 2190). When discussing Stanley with Blanche, Stella says, "But of course there were things to adjust myself to later on." (1; 2192). Stella simply changes as changes occur around her. This is highlighted further by the drastically contrasted reactions of Stanley and Blanche to change. Stanley is used to having things go his way and when they don't, he lashes out at whomever or whatever is defying him. An example of this is when Stanley throws the radio out the window during poker night when he does not want it on. Blanche breaks down when she is unable to cope with things going on around her and she feels helpless, like she is a victim. This is expressed when she is talking to Stella: "I never was hard or self-sufficient enough. When people are soft – soft people have got to shimmer and glow – they've got to put on soft colors, the colors of butterfly wings, and put on a - paper lantern over the light...It isn't enough to be soft. You've got to be soft *and attractive*. And I – I'm fading now! I don't know how much longer I can turn the trick." (5; 2217).

Stella has the ability to rise above what is expected and be her own person. She adapts her life from living at Belle Reve to living in New Orleans. She also falls for a man who is unrefined and animal like. Stella admits to her sister that she is excited by Stanley's aggressive nature which also indicates that she has overcome the pious expectations of her background to be in charge of her own sexuality. This again is in contrast to Blanche who is by no means innocent, but looks down on outwardly expressing desires. Stella is stronger than both Stanley and Blanche because she has the ability to get what she wants without being aggressive, but she is not afraid to go after what she wants and protect it after she gets it.

Stella's character should not be overlooked in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. She is a strong character who pulls the play together by providing a concrete character with predictable actions and values. Stella demonstrates Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest. She chooses a mate who has animalistic features and she adapts herself to living in a relationship that is primal. However, she is a partner in that relationship who is an important part of survival. When we are first introduced to Stella, she is catching a package of meat that Stanley has tossed up to her. This image invokes a primal hunter – gatherer image. Stanley's role to bring home food is important, but Stella's role in survival is also vital, she prepares the meals and

takes care of their home. When she is discussing the loss of Belle Reve with Blanche, Stella tells that leaving Belle Reve is the best thing she did to “make [her] own living.” (1; 2193). She later tells Blanche, “I said I am not in anything that I have a desire to get out of.” (4; 2211). This shows that Stella has a strong desire to succeed and have her piece of the American dream. She sees her home as her castle despite its size, and she is proud of her husband and has accepted his flaws because she loves him and he provides for her.

Stella’s drive to succeed and live the American dream is also displayed in her pregnancy. Her desire to have a child is part of the American dream. It is also necessary in the pursuit of survival of her and Stanley’s genes. Stanley is compared to an animal by Blanche throughout the play. Stella has admitted that she is excited by it. This drive to be with a powerful man suggests that a weaker man would not be able to provide for her or provide the ability to create and raise a child successfully. Blanche addresses this with Stella and says, “What such a man has to offer is animal force and he gave a wonderful exhibition of that! But the only way to live with such a man is to – go to bed with him! And that’s your job – not mine!” (4; 2213). When discussing Stanley and his friends to Blanche, Stella tells her that “Stanley’s the only one of his crowd that’s likely to get anywhere.” (3; 2204). This suggests that part of Stella’s primal attraction to him is his ability to be successful. This mirrors her desire to carve her own path away from her home of Belle Reve.

Stella is not outwardly aggressive in her convictions and beliefs unless she feels attacked or threatened. This natural fight or flight reaction is part of what makes Stella such a strong character able to overcome obstacles without cowering or breaking down. It is an important part of her survival in the city. She is a nurturing toward Blanche when she is not insulting her or Stanley and she makes sure to ask Mitch how his mother is. Stella comforts Eunice when she is fighting with her husband. All of these displays of affection and understanding provide foreshadowing for the kind of mother she will be. Stella has the ability to love, nurture and protect another human being suggesting that she will be a good mother and will raise a strong child. This also lends itself to the future survival of their family as a result of Stella’s strength.

Stella is a strong character, solid in her convictions and determined to make her own path in the world. She marries a man who can care for her and their child and who satisfies her animal desires. Stella should not be overlooked as a timid or quiet character in *A Streetcar Named Desire* but rather as a person who works to get ahead and succeed. She is proud of her accomplishments and cannot understand how her sister is so put off by the city. Her strength is also seen in her ability to stay calm when she is upset and to take drastic actions to protect her family by having Blanche committed to an institution. Though Stella comes from the same background as Blanche, the reader sees that she has the drive to succeed in her pursuit of her dream and that she has adapted to become more like Stanley than the

refined and delicate woman she was raised to be. This ability to adapt and survive is what gives Stella her strength. Her character provides a stable and predictable movement to the storyline. Despite the chaos around her in the city, Stella is the constant that other characters revolve around. It is not a coincidence that Stanley screams for Stella to come back to him after he hits her. It is not because he is trying to make up for what he did, it is because he needs her. Without Stella, Stanley is left to make it on his own and he knows deep down that he cannot survive without her. This is also why Blanche comes to New Orleans; when she is feeling hopeless she turns to her sister to help sort out the mess. Stella's character is stronger in her convictions than both Stanley and Blanche, and she provides support for them throughout the play.

Works Cited

Williams, Tennessee. *A Streetcar Named Desire*. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*.
7th ed. Ed. Nina Baym, et al. Vol. E. New York: Norton 2007. 2186-2248. Print.