

THINGS THAT HAPPEN IN THE DARK: READINGS OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IN STANLEY AND STELLA KOWALSKI'S RELATIONSHIP

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the presence of intimate partner violence in the relationship established between the characters of Stanley and Stella Kowalski in Tennessee Williams' 1947-premiered *A Streetcar Named Desire*. To support this critical view, the relationship will be analyzed under the light of notable research on intimate partner violence. The present paper will be framed within others, of the same and of a contrary opinion. Some possible factors motivating the view expressed in the latter will be explored, as well as the possible reasons behind the scarcity of criticism on the Kowalskis' relationship. The persistence of intimate partner violence in the real world, especially of that resembling what Stella Kowalski suffers, and the scarcity of similar works motivate the existence of pieces of criticism like this.

RESUMEN

Este artículo trata la presencia de violencia en la relación establecida entre los personajes Stanley y Stella Kowalski en la obra de Tennessee Williams estrenada en 1947 *Un tranvía llamado deseo*. Para apoyar esta interpretación, se analizará la relación bajo el prisma de destacados trabajos de investigación acerca de la violencia en el ámbito de la pareja. El presente artículo se encuadrará en

relación con otros, de la misma y de contraria opinión. Se explorarán algunos posibles factores tras la tesis expresada en los segundos, al igual que posibles razones tras la escasez de crítica sobre la relación de los Kowalski. La persistencia de violencia en el ámbito de la pareja en el mundo real, en especial la similar a la que sufre Stella Kowalski, y la escasez de trabajos similares motivan la existencia de artículos como el presente.

INTRODUCTION

Breiding et al. (2015) define intimate partner violence, abbreviated as IPV, as “physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (including coercive tactics) by a current or former intimate partner (i.e., spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, dating partner, or ongoing sexual partner)” (11). As to 2012, 37.3% of the female population of the United States, i.e. 44,981,000 women (Smith et al. 117-18), reported having suffered “contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking victimization by an intimate partner” at some point of their lives (117). 47.1%, i.e. 56,892,000 women, reported having suffered psychological violence (119-20). These statistics show the high incidence of IPV in present-day U.S.A. despite the notable rise of awareness from the mid-1960s onwards (Walker 21). Art offers a safe space in which to be exposed to depictions of IPV. Through this exposure, the individual (ideally) learns to identify IPV dynamics and realizations and how to end them, the ways in which to do so depending on the individual’s role within (abusing or abused partner) or outside the violence. Stanley and Stella Kowalski’s abusive relationship illustrates this phenomenon. Most interestingly, much of the scarce corpus of criticism on their relationship tells of how normalized IPV has come to be in Western society – a further reason to value its correct identification.

IPV DYNAMICS AS ILLUSTRATED IN STANLEY AND STELLA’S RELATIONSHIP

The first interaction between Stanley and Stella Kowalski in Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1971) already hints at the complex, abusive nature of their relationship. Notably, Stella’s first words are a complaint on Stanley’s behavior towards her (244). His aggressiveness will take a variety of forms throughout the play

(in and outside his marriage), the first being the ‘*bellowing*’ (244) of his first sentence to his wife. This first line consists of a mere four words (244) and yet stands out as his longest intervention in the exchange. This simplicity, the subject matter and the actions accompanying the first dialogue between the Kowalskis illustrate jointly the image of primitiveness and violence that Blanche DuBois will later use to describe Stella and Stanley’s relationship (323).

The violent imagery of raw meat and blood (244) as associated to Stanley further shows his (and Stella’s) adherence to patriarchal gender roles (bread-winner husband and homemaker wife that waits for him at home), especially within their relationship. This adherence comes from the value their respective socioeconomic origins taught them to attach to patriarchal notions. Stella was born and raised high-class (even if impoverished) as the descendant of Southern plantation owners. It is from this background that her sister Blanche’s mildly-expressed xenophobia likely comes from (262). On his part, Stanley was born and brought up as a working-class descendant to Polish immigrants (374). He is (and probably knows himself to be) likely to spend his entire life in the inadequate living and working conditions of which the play offers a glimpse. The performance of traditional masculinity, “*the gaudy seed-bearer*” (265), as Williams puts it, becomes for Stanley the main way to exercise and retain the little power he possesses in the socioeconomic hierarchy. As Johnson points out (focusing on the context of intimate relationships, although the principle can apply to all facets of life), “Violence is not always motivated by a desire to gain or resist control. [...] Sometimes it is a matter of self-image” (19). Based on the statistical results of a 1987-conducted survey, Smith (1990) links socioeconomic identifiers like Stanley’s to a greater likelihood of adherence to sexist thought and consequent use of IPV:

Lower-income husbands, less educated husbands, and husbands in relatively low-status jobs were significantly more likely than more advantaged husbands to subscribe to an ideology of familial patriarchy. The former were also significantly more likely to have beaten their wives (268).

In the late 1940s, the implied time frame for the action of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the trend known as domestic containment, followed by institutions as well as the general population, fostered a further revalorization of patriarchal notions (May 2002).

In his display of traditional, sexist masculinity, women are to Stanley little more than sex toys for him to find physical pleasure in (Williams 265). This includes his wife Stella, whom he molests during her final emotional breakdown (419). The importance of sexuality in their relationship (373) follows the pattern pointed out by Walker (193). Walker's findings especially make sense of Stella's acceptance of violence. The value Stella attributes to the sexual component of their relationship motivates her to endure the abuse: "But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark – that sort of make everything else seem – unimportant" (Williams 321). Stanley exercises his adherence to traditional gender roles in less sexual ways, too. His world is strictly divided into female and male behaviors. He expects Stella to take care of him as a homemaker (Walker 102). When he suspects she may not fulfill this role, even if only temporarily, he turns accusatory (Williams 269). Stanley protects and continues the *status quo* from which his power stems. His poker games function as strictly-male settings into which he does not allow women (290).

It is not only women that Stanley believes himself superior to (or acts as if he did). He is shown to domineer his group of friends, whom he expects to act as he desires (375). When they do not, he does not hesitate to "correct" their behavior. In the case of Mitch, Stanley's anger at his friend's "misbehavior" is fueled further by Mitch's interest on Blanche (295-96). This attitude characterizes Stanley as a possessive, jealous friend. Moreover, Stanley underestimates the capacities of those around him in favor of his own (322, 324).

Stanley's dominance over Stella takes on a variety of forms. His exercise of male privilege matches that of intimate terrorists (Johnson 15-16). Under no pretense does Stanley allow Stella to control him (Williams 275). When Stella questions his power before his friends in Scene Three, Stanley responds by humiliating her publicly (before his friends) through physical violence (290). The use of a "*whack [...] on her thigh*" (290) specifically, due to the sexual connotations of the area in Western culture, conveys a double message. On the one hand, Stanley re-establishes his power in making general decisions that affect other members of the household: in this case, the duration of the poker game which is taking place in the kitchen. On the other hand, he claims his gender-motivated dominance over the body of his wife. As articulated by Walker when discussing general patterns in abusive relationships,

"Sex [is] used as a way for the batterer to mark the woman as his possession" (67). Furthermore, Stella's remark after she leaves the kitchen implies that this sort of public humiliation is recurrent in their relationship. A more straightforward instance of sexual violence takes place when Stanley gropes Stella during her final emotional breakdown (Williams 419). Two possible motivations for that instance of sexual abuse arise: a desire for sexual satisfaction and/or an attempt to improve Stella's mood through sex. Stella's unresponsiveness (419) proves the failure of the latter.

There is economic abuse as well. Homemaker Stella does not earn her own wage and thus depends financially on her husband – who restricts her access to money (318). Stanley's preference "to pay bills himself" (318) stems from his desire to control and dominate. As Johnson describes, the intimate terrorist "controls all the money. [The abused female partner] is allowed no bank account and no credit cards. [...] He keeps all the cash and she has to ask him for money when she needs to buy groceries or clothes for herself or the children" (15). Regarding Belle Reve, Stanley claims to be looking after Stella and their baby's financial wellbeing (Williams 284) as a façade to hide his true, selfish interests (273). Notably, in using their (then unborn) child, Stanley is partaking in yet another form of violence that Johnson links to intimate terrorists (16).

In her study of IPV, Walker identifies "three distinct phases associated with a recurring battering cycle: (1) tension-building accompanied with rising sense of danger, (2) the acute battering incident, and (3) loving-contrition" (91). The dynamics of Stanley and Stella's relationship follow this cycle. Two battering incidents, to use Walker's terminology, are depicted in the play: the unseen "*blow*" (Williams 303) in Scene Three and the end of the birthday supper (371) in Scene Eight. Both instances are preceded by a succession of lesser confrontations of gradually rising violence. The tension becomes most noticeable just before each battering incident. During the poker night, what bothers Stanley is noise (294-295, 302). This complaint comes across as hypocritical, considering his tendency to raise his own voice and make noise by his violent handling of various objects (328). The violence exercised on the radio (302) links the late stage of this tension-building phase (or, alternatively, the early acute battering phase) with the acute battering incident in Scene Eight:

STELLA. Your face and your fingers are disgustingly greasy. Go and wash up and then help me clear the table.

[He hurls a plate to the floor.]

STANLEY. That's how I'll clear the table! *[He seizes her arm]* 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! What do 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! *[He hurls a cup and saucer to the floor]* My place is cleared! You want me to clear your places? (371)

Here, Stanley makes use of physical violence on both Stella and the dinner service. The violent breakage of the dinner service (unless it was made of a resistant material such as metal) adds a further element of shock and violence to the scene. Johnson analyzes violence exercised upon inanimate objects as a realization of IPV, especially when used as a threat (30). In hurling the radio out violently through the window and throwing the dinner service to the floor, Stanley is demonstrating his physical capacity to harm Stella (and anyone who opposes or upsets him) and his psychological willingness to intervene in order to have things his way – even if that requires the use of physical violence. Moreover, he claims his dominance verbally. His final “so don't forget it” (371) seems to convey the further, verbal threat that, were Stella to dare to question his authority again, she would probably meet a fate similar to that of the dinner service. In his role as an intimate terrorist, Stanley makes use of threats and intimidation to assure his wife's submission. This matches Johnson's description of intimate terrorists' pattern of behavior in this respect (16).

The climatic act of physical violence in Scene Three is exercised directly upon Stella, although offstage:

[Stanley charges after Stella [...] She backs out of sight. He advances and disappears. There is the sound of a blow. Stella cries out. Blanche screams and runs into the kitchen. The men rush forward and there is grappling and cursing. Something is overturned with a crash.] (303)

The (unseen) assault takes place as the climatic consequence of a gradual rise of tension, after which said tension experiences a harsh drop. This structure follows Walker's findings (91, 94). All characters present show their rejection of Stanley's direct use of violence upon Stella: his friends try to stop him first and manage to restrain him

afterwards (Williams 303); Blanche warns her sister off and later helps her leave (302, 304). Notably, Eunice's reprimand to Stanley ("You can't beat on a woman an' then call 'er back! She won't come! [...] I hope they do haul you in and turn the fire hose on you, same as *the last time!*" 306, my emphasis) implies that this is not the first time that Stanley physically assaults Stella. Physical violence is recurrent in their relationship – to what extent, the audience can only wonder. Mitch's later disregard of the incident ("Naw, it's a shame this had to happen *when you just got here*. But don't take it serious," 308, my emphasis) hints again at the recurrence of IPV in the Kowalskis' relationship as well as at its normalization in their social environment.

After the poker night incident (303), Stanley engages in some of the behaviors that Walker identifies as characteristic of the loving-contrite phase: "In phase three that follows, the batterer may apologize profusely, try to assist his victim, show kindness and remorse, and shower her with gifts and/or promises" (Walker 94). Specifically, Stanley displays an arguably submissive behavior (Williams 312) and makes Stella promises (314) and gifts. These gifts take different forms. One is that of "ten dollars to smooth things over" (318). The money provides Stella with a false sense of economic independence, since she does not earn a wage and Stanley restricts her access to his salary (318). A second gift is having the radio he tossed through the window (303) repaired. This combines the material with the immaterial: the material essence of the radio and the financial cost of the repair plus the investment of his time and the display of a willingness to repair the damage caused. Thirdly, there is sex. Despite the absence of any explicit confirmation or description of the act, Stella's resting attitude the morning after the poker night (310) and her sister's supposition that the Kowalskis have had sex (311) add to the sexual undertones of Stanley and Stella's reunion after the acute battering incident (307). The focus on Stella's physical appearance, the reference to animal-like behavior, the abundance of physical touch and proximity and the visual parallel to the image of the newly-wed couple arriving at their new home (the wife being carried by the husband) function as sexual imagery suggesting a later sexual union of the Kowalskis through intercourse. Not only do they use sex to try to satisfy their emotional needs (Walker 193), but Stanley specifically could be offering sex in an attempt to improve Stella's mood and opinion of him. Right after the second battering incident depicted (Williams 371), sex within the

loving-contrite phase reappears in the form of a hug (373) and references to the state of their sexual relationship in the past, which Stanley promises to recover (373). Notably, Stanley blames the worsened state of their sex life (and, by extension, of their relationship) on Blanche's presence: he refuses to acknowledge the blame in the intimate terrorism dynamics he exercises.

Throughout the play, Stella expresses (verbally and non-verbally) her dislike of Stanley's exercise of dominance and aggressiveness towards her. She admonishes him (244), rebukes him for humiliating her before his friends (290), "*cries out*" (303) and temporarily avoids him (304) after being hit and "*begins to cry weakly*" after the birthday supper incident (371). But does Stella abuse Stanley in any way? She occasionally insults him and gives him orders (371). Notably, most of her violent reactions towards Stanley take place as a response to Stanley's own violence as exercised upon Blanche (280). Stella's abuse of Stanley takes a mostly verbal form (275). The most physical she gets is by seizing his bowling shirt and tearing it (presumably, by accident, despite the lack of explicit indications on the matter) – again, in response to Stanley's abuse of Blanche (377). Most importantly, Stella does not "attempt to exert general control" (Johnson 13) over Stanley, whilst he does over her. She is not what Johnson calls an "intimate terrorist" (13), whilst Stanley is. Following Johnson's terminology, Stella's abusive treatment of Stanley could be identified, if anything, as "violent resistance" (17).

Despite her overt discomfort, however "*mildly*" (Williams 244) expressed, Stella admits to being at the same time "*thrilled*" (312) by Stanley's aggressiveness. This is hinted at as early as in Scene One: "*She cries out in protest [...]; then she laughs breathlessly*" (244). Stella herself elaborates in Scene Four:

STELLA. No, it isn't all right for anybody to make such a terrible row, but – people do sometimes. Stanley's always smashed things. Why, on our wedding night – soon as we came in here – he snatched off one of my slippers and rushed about the place smashing the light-bulbs with it. [...]

[*She laughs.*]

BLANCHE. And you – you *let* him? Didn't *run*, didn't *scream*?

STELLA. I was – sort of – thrilled by it. (312)

The exercise of physical violence on inanimate objects (302, 312, 371) has two functions. One is the threat of what Stanley can and is willing to do to Stella. The other is the ostentation of his athletic capacities and active attitude in life. These traits belong to the Western ideal of traditional masculinity and male attractiveness, to which Stella's thrill at Stanley's displays of violence is only compliant. Moreover, part of Stella's attraction towards Stanley (and his active aggressiveness) would derive from the contrast he posed to her previous life at Belle Reve (377). Throughout the play, Belle Reve is associated with passivity and dullness, together with the color white (249). In contrast, Stanley's active vitality is linked to bright colors (391), especially red, which has traditionally signified violence and sexual ardor in Western culture (244). His working-class status and Polish heritage as well make Stella's choice of him a rebellion against the aristocratic milieu in which she was raised (285). Despite the abuse suffered, Stella chooses to maintain her relationship to Stanley: "I'm not in anything I want to get out of" (314). She downplays his displays of violence, which she has normalized (312), in favor of the rewards of their sex life (321). As Stella illustrates, the cycle of IPV itself can prevent the abused partner from ending the abusive relationship (Walker 94).

When analyzed under the light of Walker's and Johnson's research-motivated, theoretical models of IPV, the Kowalskis' relationship emerges as toxic and abusive. At the individual level, Stanley fits the behavioral models of intimate terrorists and Stella fits the behavioral model of abused partners. The Kowalskis' relationship dynamics illustrate Walker's three-phase cycle of IPV. Even Stella's unwillingness to end the relationship observes Walker's findings. The antecedence of Williams' play to the two theoretical works used here for its analysis (Johnson's and Walker's) links to Walker's denounce on the lack of extensive sociological research on IPV up to the late 20th century (Walker xv).

NOTABLE CRITICAL READINGS OF STANLEY AND STELLA'S RELATIONSHIP

The present paper stands, mainly, within two traditions: literary criticism of the Kowalskis' relationship and the acknowledgement of that relationship as abusive. Although no two works of criticism can be exactly the same, similarities are possible. Previous critics have read Stanley and Stella Kowalski's relationship as displaying IPV,

however similar or dissimilar their frameworks, arguments or conclusions might be to each other or to this paper.

Koprince (2009) studies the toxicity of the character of Stanley by comparing his behavior to sociological models of real-life perpetrators of IPV. In contrast with the present paper, Koprince finds a divergence in Stanley's behavior within and outside his relationship to Stella. All other general conclusions reached are in line with the present paper. Stanley and Stella's relationship dynamics are understood as an illustration of the three-phase cycle originally described by Walker (Koprince 55-6). Vlasopolos (1986) too highlights the cyclical nature of their abuse dynamics and highlights the normalization of IPV in the Kowalskis' milieu (330). Such a normalization helps ensure the continuity of abuse, whatever its form. Adler (1990) draws attention to the variety of forms that Stanley's aggressiveness adopts throughout the play (53), including sexual violence (63).

In line with Stanley's possessiveness over his friends, Koprince characterizes his animosity towards Blanche as a form of jealousy (52). Adler too sees symptoms of jealousy, since "Blanche can remind his wife of what she sacrificed to marry him and of the severe limitations on what he has been able to provide her in return" (51). According to Adler, Stanley's abusive behavior arises from his deep feelings of insecurity (20) plus the toxic notions on gender that he has been taught, although these influences do not erase Stanley's responsibility for his own actions (59). Adler reads in *A Streetcar Named Desire* a call for the deconstruction of the strict gender binary depicted, which harms individuals through the imposition of limiting models of behavior (59).

Adherence to patriarchal gender roles is one of the traits associated to IPV victimhood that Koprince highlights in Stella's behavior (53-4). Koprince deals too with Stella's acceptance of the abuse suffered. Despite the divergence in some of the resources used for argument support, the conclusions reached by the present paper and Koprince agree on Stella's deeper, ultimate dislike of the violence suffered (55).

The pieces of criticism discussed frame this paper as part of a tradition of readings similar in their conclusions, even when not as much in their argumentation or use of resources. Despite the existence of this tradition, not all critics read IPV in the Kowalskis' relationship. Neither do all critics condemn the violence that Stanley is depicted (with varying degrees of explicitness) as perpetrating.

Cardullo (1988) dismisses all accusations of violence and primitiveness in Stanley's relationship to Stella (89). Similarly, and as Koprince points out (58), Roderick (1988) characterizes Stanley and Stella's relationship as a "sexually healthy marriage [...] defiled by the profane intruder Blanche with her sexual perversity" (94-95). To support his claims regarding the Kowalskis, Roderick uses Steve and Eunice Hubbell's relationship, which he reads as healthy too (94). To Roderick, "On a purely psychological level rather than a social one, [...] Stanley emerges as hero" (94). Bak (2004) discusses a similar view of the character of Stanley:

Ruby Cohn sides with Stanley as protector of the family, stating polemically that Stanley's 'cruellest gesture in the play is to tear the paper lantern off the light bulb' [Stanton, 50]. She points out that we never actually see 'Stanley hit Stella' or 'rape Blanche' [Stanton, 50]. In fact, she argues, the rape itself results from Blanche's licentious provocation. Stanley, on the other hand, is faithful and loyal; 'his cruelty defends his world' [Stanton, 50]. (11)

From Cohn's viewpoint, the Kowalskis' relationship displays no abuse. This stands at one end of the critical spectrum. At a less extreme position, though still favoring Stanley, Riddel (1988) acknowledges the use of physical aggression during the poker night (Williams 303) but does not consider the whole incident abusive (27). For Riddel, Stella's return to Stanley sorts out everything and characterizes the whole incident as (from Riddel's viewpoint) non-abusive. Riddel sees Stanley's aggressiveness and Stella's submission as complementary forces that, when coming into contact, form a unit that is whole and harmonious (27). Berkman (1988) holds a similar opinion of Stanley and Stella's reunion, "in which sex beautifully establishe[s] the forgiveness necessary for them to end their conflict" (39).

Despite the diversity found in their arguments and fine-tuning, all works discussed ultimately perceive Stanley and Stella's relationship as healthy. This opposes them to the present paper and the other works of a similar viewpoint. That opposition alone connects all works, those that read IPV in the relationship and those that do not. A deeper connection stems from the object of analysis that all these works share: the relationship between Stanley and Stella.

PROPOSED FACTORS OF INFLUENCE ON THE POSITIVE PERCEPTION OF THE KOWALSKIS' RELATIONSHIP

The patterns resulting from research on real-life IPV can be argued to fit the dynamics of Stanley and Stella's relationship, thus characterizing it as abusive. If a position that believes in the presence of IPV in the Kowalskis' relationship is to be assumed, the existence of criticism claiming the opposite prompts a question: why do some critics not read IPV in Stanley and Stella's relationship? Three main factors will be proposed and explored: patriarchal teachings, Stanley's complexity as a character and Marlon Brando's performance as Stanley. Even in the absence of agreement, it is possible (and, arguably, advisable) to try to understand the motivations behind these critics' perceptions. This effort serves as an exercise of empathy as much as of the intellect. Moreover, knowledge of the variables can help avoid being influenced by them.

The first possible cause to be considered will be patriarchal teachings. The Oxford English Dictionary defines patriarchy as "The predominance of men in positions of power and influence in society, with cultural values and norms favouring men" (*OED Online*). Such gender hierarchy has historically been the dominant society system in Western countries such as the United States of America (where the action of *A Streetcar Named Desire* takes place). After World War II especially, until contested from the 60s and 70s onwards, adherence to patriarchal values in the U.S.A. became prominent among the population when compared to other decades within the 20th century (May 2002).

In patriarchal thought, man and woman form a theoretical dichotomy (with practical consequences) where the first is the primary and superior element (Moi 124-25). Women are inherently devalued for not being men. Consequently, violence against women (including IPV against women) becomes normalized. As Koprince points out, "Until the 1970s, the problem of domestic violence was virtually ignored in American society. Wife-beating was considered a 'family matter' rather than a crime or a serious social issue. Women were typically expected to deal with the problem themselves, to keep it behind closed doors" (49). The abusive male partner feels entitled to perpetrate IPV thanks to his self-perceived superiority: "One woman we interviewed told us that she was first beaten on her honeymoon and when she cried and protested, her husband replied, 'I married you so I own you'" (Johnson 13). The patriarchal society

around the abuser accepts this entitlement and the behaviors that it prompts.

The normalization and even justification of violence against women brings up individuals to perceive relationships such as Stanley and Stella's as healthy. The individual may acknowledge the presence of violence, as Riddel (1988) does, but not identify the whole as abusive (27). Riddel's critical assessment of the poker night incident as a whole depends on Stella's behavior: that is, on the victim's actions, not the perpetrator's aim to harm. Ultimately, the blame is placed on the victim, not the abuser. The train of thought followed by Riddel seems to be that Stella enables the violence, so it is not abusive. But Stella's refusal to end her relationship to Stanley is influenced by a series of destructive factors (including the cycle of abuse itself) that Riddel does not consider. She does not like being abused – she is trapped in a destructive, vicious cycle. Ignorance on the dynamics of IPV, specifically on the roles of sex in IPV (Walker 193), shows up in Berkman (1988) too (39).

Alternatively, other critics may not acknowledge the presence of violence in the Kowalskis' relationship. This seems to be the case of Cardullo (1988). Cohn (1977) holds the position that might be considered most extreme through her minimization of Stanley's abusive actions. Even if we were to take as violence only what is depicted explicitly in the play, similarly to Cohn (Bak 11), Stanley's verbal behavior can be identified in many cases as violent. Why would Cohn not acknowledge this? She might not consider it violence, despite its intention to harm and coerce. This would be a consequence of the patriarchal normalization of non-physical violence against women. Regarding this normalization phenomenon, Johnson warns against "the dangers of focusing narrowly on violent acts while ignoring the broader relationship context within which the violence takes place" (11); coercion, threats and other forms of control add to individual acts of violence (whatever their form, including verbal) in the identification of a relationship as abusive.

Critics who characterize the Kowalskis' relationship as healthy, in general, would be doing so from the patriarchal framework they, as individuals, have been raised to comply to. The influence of external forces explains the reasoning behind their critical perceptions. However, it does not erase their responsibility. In their normalization (or even approval) of violence, works like the ones discussed help perpetuate the patriarchal system that permeates their criticism. Moreover, their authority could encourage readers to

adhere to the patriarchal notions (however directly) endorsed. Literary criticism and the patriarchal framework thus get to feed each other in a vicious circle.

“Male/female” is not the only dichotomy Western thought uses to classify reality (Moi 124-25). Another is “good/bad” (or, alternatively, “good/evil”). What exactly is considered good or bad may vary depending on a number of factors, but the opposition remains. This differentiation can be applied to fictional characters, as to any other reality. But what happens when a character is not easily classified into only one of these categories? What happens when, according to one given moral system, some of the traits or actions of a given character could be classified as good and some others as bad? One solution would be to reject the “good/bad” binary and position the character somewhere in between the two terms. Another option would be to ignore some of the traits and actions and classify the character as either good or bad. The latter might be what motivates some works of criticism to view Stanley positively despite the abuse he is depicted to perpetrate throughout the play.

Burks (1987) quotes Tennessee Williams as stating of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, “I don’t want to focus guilt or blame on any one character but to have it a tragedy of misunderstanding and insensitivity to others” (32). The lack of a strong authorial bias shows in the complexity of the characters depicted. This includes Stanley, whom Brustein (1988) characterizes as “a highly complex and ambiguous character, one who can be taken either as hero or as villain” (9).

The classification of traits and actions as either good or bad is always subjective. Abuse, nevertheless, is easily identified as the latter. An analysis of the character of Stanley Kowalski in the light of posterior research on IPV identifies him as an “intimate terrorist” (Johnson 13). His relationship with Stella continuously repeats a three-stage cycle of abuse (Walker 91). He is also violent and controlling towards his friends. Moreover, although no explicit descriptions or confirmation are provided, it is strongly implied that he rapes his sister-in-law Blanche (Williams 402, 405). At a more subjective level, he tends to behave rudely, such as by ignoring others and prioritizing his own interests (370-371). This links with the selfishness implied to be at the core for his upset regarding the loss of Belle Reve (273). His use of Stella and their child’s wellbeing as a façade indicates a willingness to manipulate and deceive (284).

Are there any positive qualities to Stanley, as well? Surprisingly for a working-class man in the circa-1947 United States of America (likely to have received secondary-level formal education at most), he possesses some legal knowledge (272). This would evidence a desire to learn and a capacity to navigate complex theoretical concepts. Before the events of the play, he served in the military with much success (258). His simplicity prompts a sensible pragmatism to his thought and actions (266) as well as a rejection of superficiality and artifice (278-79). All these, however subjectively, can be identified as positive traits. Furthermore, he is the one to uncover the truths that Blanche has been hiding from everyone (359-62, 366). To what extent this is motivated by Stanley's animosity towards Blanche and to what extent by his moral duty to truth and to Stella and Mitch (whom Blanche has been lying to) is up to debate. The author of the present paper believes it to be a roughly equal mix.

Some of Stanley's actions towards Stella in the play can be classified as nurturing. Most if not all of these can be identified as realizations of the loving-contrite phase of the cycle of abuse their relationship follows. To readers and critics unaware of the idiosyncrasy of IPV dynamics, nevertheless, this sort of actions may seem to reflect a healthy side to Stanley's behavior and attitude to Stella. A realization of the loving-contrite phase especially likely not to be recognized as such would be the double date that the Kowalskis go on (348-49). The difficulty arises from its in-play distance in time to the preceding battering incident shown (303).

The contrasts that Stanley is capable of add to his complexity. He can flaunt his athletic abilities by throwing the white radio violently through the window (302) but also by delicately carrying his pregnant wife in his arms (307). He can be extremely simple in his speech (244) but, surprisingly for a working-class man, possesses some legal knowledge (272). The essence of his characterization is neutral, neither abusive nor nurturing, neither uneducated nor educated. He is not doomed to be classified as either. He can choose. It is his actions (nurturing or abusive, uneducated or educated) that tilt him towards one binary term or the other. The combination of (subjectively) good and bad facets to Stanley's personality and actions constitute him as a complex character. The obstinacy to classify him as either one term or the other of the good/bad dichotomy might have lead some critics to overlook his abusive actions in favor of his positive traits, so as to identify him as "god" according to the critic's system of values.

Critical perceptions of Stanley, furthermore, could be influenced not only by the character written by Williams, but also by its theatrical performance. In the original 1947 Broadway production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the character of Stanley Kowalski was assigned to 25-year-old Marlon Brando (Kolin 24-5). His Stanley influenced all that came afterwards (24, 28, 39). It would not be far-fetched to attribute to him some influence, however conscious and to whatever extent, on critics' perceptions of the character originally depicted on paper.

Brando's attractiveness and charm placed audiences in Stella's position in their desire for Stanley. As Kolin claims, "In addition to Brando's physique, his good looks transformed Stanley into a sexual icon, a new male sexual hero arousing women in the audience as no actor on the American stage had done before" (27). Young, "muscular" (Kolin 26) Brando brought to life Stanley Kowalski's overt sexuality – and even heightened it (27-8). For the most part, it did not threaten the views on sex of post-World War II U.S.A. (May 16-7, 20). Stanley is married, he is a man, he is heterosexual (or, at least, does not show signs of attraction towards other men). Moreover, before the play ends, his first child is born (within marriage). His sexuality achieves the goal of procreation within marriage that society sets up. His rape of Blanche (Williams 402), a form of violence that is sexual, threatens the system in that it can be identified as sex outside wedlock. Nevertheless, it complies with patriarchy in that it functions as a punishment to Blanche for her defiance of gender roles plus the abuse she has perpetrated on others (336-39, 386). Roderick (1988) makes explicit his critical adherence to this view of the rape (95).

Besides his power of seduction, Brando's appearance could easily have improved audiences' (and critics') perception of Stanley through the "attractiveness halo effect [...] according to which attractive individuals are expected to be more sociable, friendly, warm, competent, and intelligent than less attractive individuals" (Lorenzo et al. 1777). On the psychological level, Marlon Brando's performance brought further complexity to the character of Stanley as well. Bak tells, "In Brando's reading for the part, Williams found what had been lacking all along in his vision of Stanley — humanism" (20). Brustein (1988) agrees, and adds:

As played by Brando, Stanley Kowalski somehow emerged as a more appealing, a more sympathetic, and (most important) a more

sensitive character than Williams created [...]. After Stanley, the brutal proletarian was rarely to be seen again. [...] And although he inherited Stanley Kowalski’s speechlessness, his animality, and his violent behavior, these qualities were now seen as marks of profundity of character. (10)

This complexity would add to that already present in the character on paper and hinder his binary classification as “bad.” Notably, according to Brustein, Brando’s performance shaped a whole literary archetype (10). If its scope was such, it makes sense that it could influence the critical perception of Stanley, however partly.

The attractiveness halo effect and the complexity that Brando’s performance added to the character could make it more difficult for critics (and audiences) to characterize Stanley negatively. A solution would be simply to reject the good/bad classification and acknowledge all that there is to Stanley, the good and the bad, however subjective these categories might be. If the dichotomy is kept, Brando’s performance tilts the balance in favor of Stanley and makes it more probable for the character to be classified in positive terms. Such a perception of Stanley (fully positive, ignoring or justifying his abusive actions) could lead critics (and audiences) to disregard the violence present in his relationship to Stella.

RELEVANCE OF THE CRITICAL READING OF IPV IN STANLEY AND STELLA’S RELATIONSHIP

In the nearly seventy-one years since the premiere of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, much literary criticism has been written on Williams’ play. Nevertheless, the works dealing with Stanley and Stella Kowalski’s relationship are few. The reference to a total of only eight in the present paper illustrates this scarcity.

Blanche is most frequently the focus of character analysis, such as in Roderick (1988). When Stanley is studied, it is usually in relation to Blanche through the symbolism of their opposition (Riddel 1988). Stanley and Stella’s relationship is not analyzed as frequently, and rarely on its own. The rich symbolism of Blanche, on her own and in contrast to Stanley, seems to have caught and retained critical attention with enough strength to limit the analysis of Stanley and Stella’s relationship quantitatively. The narrative weight of Blanche’s story and her clash with Stanley has pushed aside the Kowalski’s as a narrative of secondary importance. Also, due to the patriarchal normalization of IPV against women, their relationship

might have come across as unexceptional, something too common to prompt critical inquiry and creation.

Of the relatively few works of criticism dealing with Stanley and Stella's relationship, even fewer identify it as abusive. Among the works discussed that acknowledge the toxicity of the Kowalskis' relationship, the earliest is Vlasopolos', published in 1986. Adler, published in 1990, comes next, and thirdly Koprince in 2009. The rise of awareness on IPV against women from the mid-1960s onwards (Walker 21) is not of immediate effect in literary criticism. Cohn condoned Stanley in 1977 and Bloom's 1988 collection of notable essays display predominantly a positive characterization of the Kowalskis' relationship. The possible factors behind such views have been explored in the present paper. The scarcity of criticism acknowledging and analyzing the toxicity of Stanley and Stella's relationship, more than seventy years after the play's premiere, signals the need for works like the present paper. Without such pieces, the whole of literary criticism on *A Streetcar Named Desire* will never be as exhaustive as it could.

Works of criticism acknowledging that toxicity can benefit not only academia but real, everyday life: however fictional Stella Kowalski might be, her situation is not as much. Theoretical patterns of IPV dynamics, such as those proposed by Johnson (2008) and Walker (2009), after all, result from the study of an abundance of real-life cases. Recent statistics such as the ones set forth by Smith et al. (2017) estimate the current incidence of IPV, over half a century after the premiere of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Stanley abuses Stella in many ways throughout the play and, as various characters' remarks imply, beyond. This violence includes what Smith et al. label as "psychological aggression," comprising "expressive aggression (such as name calling, insulting or humiliating an intimate partner) and coercive control, which includes behaviors that are intended to monitor and control or threaten an intimate partner" (117). Physical violence takes form as an unseen "blow" (303), the "loud whack of his hand on her thigh" (290) that serves to humiliate Stella before Stanley's friends and the reaction by which he "seizes her arm" (371) while abusing her verbally. Similarly, "30.3% of U.S. women reported being slapped, pushed, or shoved by an intimate partner in their lifetime" (Smith et al. 118). In the state of Louisiana, where the Kowalskis live in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, approximately 636,000 women have experienced physical, sexual or stalking victimization by an intimate partner at some point of their

lives (Smith et al. 128). In the case of psychological IPV this is true for roughly 831,000 women (134). The final molestation (Williams 419) fits Smith et al.’s definition of “unwanted sexual contact” as “unwanted sexual experiences involving touch but not sexual penetration, such as being kissed in a sexual way, or having sexual body parts fondled, groped, or grabbed” (17). According to Smith et al.’s study, this type of IPV has been experienced by “16.4% of U.S. women during their lifetime” (118). The broader category of “contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner” (140) was reported by an estimated 366,000 non-Hispanic white women (like Stella is implied to be) in the state of Louisiana (140).

Stella’s problems are still far from only fictional. Her toxic relationship to Stanley can function as an example of what IPV can look like, so that audiences and readers learn to identify its dynamics and consequently can (try to) avoid or stop them in real life. Criticism pointing at that toxicity can be of help for readers and audiences.

CONCLUSION

When compared to patterns of behavior identified by later research on intimate partner violence, Stanley Kowalski arises as an intimate terrorist who abuses his wife Stella and holds a general attitude of superiority and control in all aspects of life. Stella too fits the behavioral patterns of victims of IPV. Even her unwillingness to end the abusive relationship observes the typical patterns of thought of IPV victims. Of the few critics to analyze Stanley and Stella’s relationship, some agree on the presence of IPV, although others do not. The variables prompting the latter might be patriarchal teachings received as individuals, Stanley’s complexity as a character and/or the attractiveness halo effect caused by Marlon Brando’s original performance. Criticism that perceives the relationship as healthy illustrates the potential failure by the reader or spectator to identify the IPV patterns present in the Kowalskis’ relationship – and, potentially, the failure to identify IPV patterns in any relationship, fictional or real. The statistically high prevalence of IPV victimization in modern-day U.S.A. evidences the importance of the effective acknowledgment of IPV (in all its realizations) as such. The scarcity of critical works on the Kowalskis’ relationship, and more specifically

of works that identify its toxicity, functions as further motivation for the existence of the present paper.

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