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The social construction of gender

A comparison of Tennessee William's *A Streetcar Named Desire*
and Eugene O' Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*

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Contents

- 1. Introduction 3**
- 2. Feminist theory 3**
- 3. The Two Plays..... 6**
 - 3.1 Tennessee Williams – A Streetcar Named Desire 6
 - 3.2 Eugene O’Neill – Long Day’s Journey into Night 8
- 4. Portraying gender 10**
- 5. Stereotypes 11**
- 6. Theme-based comparisons 14**
 - 6.1 Social construction..... 16
 - 6.2 Power/acting space..... 17
 - 6.3 Emotional response 19
- 7. Conclusion..... 21**
- Bibliography 23**

Abstract

This essay focuses on making a comparative gender analysis between Eugene O'Neill's play "Long Day's Journey into Night" and Tennessee Williams's play "A Streetcar Named Desire". It emphasizes the portraying of socially constructed gender and how the authors present their characters in relation to emotional response as well as power and acting space.

Keywords:

Social construction - Gender - Tennessee Williams - Eugene O'Neill - Feminist theory - Analysis - A Streetcar Named Desire - Long Day's Journey into Night

1. Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to make a comparative analysis of how Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) and Tennessee Williams's "*A Streetcar Named Desire*" (1947) portray the characters' socially constructed gender. Williams and O'Neill portray the male and female characters in diverse ways but they still offer a fairly traditional approach in both plays, meaning that the male and female characters are presented as different. The two authors portray the connection between men and women as exceedingly romantic, powerful and problematic. There are many similarities to be seen, making a comparative analysis between these two of their works intriguing and enjoyable.

The essay will focus on how the plays portray gender, how stereotypes are used and questioned and make a theme-based comparison focusing on the social construction of gender; the characters' acting space, their power versus powerlessness; and their emotional response, which sometimes follows and sometimes breaks the stereotypical patterns. As we shall see, Williams' and O'Neill's plays initially present power as belonging to the male gender but the female characters are slowly empowered, especially through their necessity for the male characters' happiness.

2. Feminist theory

Robbins (1999) discusses women in relation to the politics of word as well as the politics of world. Feminist theory focuses on one thing: women. Women are the center of attention in order to outweigh and critique the lack of importance women may be accorded.

This essay will discuss stereotypes. To further explain what is meant by stereotypes in this essay; when examining socially constructed gender, there are expectations on *how* men and women are supposed to portray themselves through expectations regarding their personalities and appearances. These gender related stereotypes have been created and developed throughout history, and give us guidelines on appropriate behaviors connected to our gender. Through a cultural and sociological perspective (where literature has its place) men are strong, women are

weak. Society places men in a position superior toward women, even though they constantly rely on the assistance of their women in order to fulfill their needs.

The stereotypical features can all be traced back to various theories when discussing feminism. I do believe that today's society might offer a slightly different attitude towards women, compared to when Williams and O'Neill wrote their plays. However, that there is still tremendous work to be done concerning this issue. Many of the structures and rules that were being followed back then are still of current interest to the feminist theorists in today's society. Portraying gender is like portraying society and its hierarchy and politics. Robbins explains it in a fairly easy way:

Feminist theories argue that women are also formed by other structures that build on economic subjection and physical repression, and that these structures have tended to operate as structures of oppression because of the social and physical inequalities of gender.¹

However, there are aspects that do not fit into the stereotypical patterns of how gender is represented and revealed. There is more to be discovered when reading deeper into the plays. Robbins describes it as “/.../ encoding ‘proper’ behavior and ‘proper’ structures of belief and feeling”²

Readers need to focus on *how* a patriarchal society can be perceived and criticized through literature. Robbins (1999) describes the importance of analyzing a text from a feminist point of view when examining matters related to feminism.

At the heart of feminist literary theory, therefore, is a will to political agency - reading in a particular way, writing about what one has read with this in mind, these things can make a difference.³

Schweickart gives examples of the roles of women in texts and how the reader should view the text from a feminist point of view, since this criticism is much needed.

¹ Robbins, (1999) 51.

² Robbins, (1999) 50.

³ Robbins, (1999) 50.

Male professors, male historians and male poets cannot be relied on for the truth about women. Woman herself must undertake the study of woman.⁴

Feminist criticism is therefore open to interpretation as long as the reader focuses on how gender is constructed. The three themes above therefore become a strategy of reading into feminist literature and analyzing texts from a feminist point of view that improves the perspective and understanding associated with socially constructed gender and the gender roles it offers.

Williams' and O'Neill's plays should reward that type of criticism, since there are patterns of stereotypical gender roles. Most importantly, they are hard not to notice since it is obvious that they fit perfectly into the society of the decades when they were written. Robbins argues that historical specificity is of high relevance when reading feminist literary theory:

They are always to be understood as relating to historic and geographic specificity, both in terms of the moment when they are first produced, and at the moments when they are reproduced by our reading of them.⁵

The contexts of the plays are still of interest when analyzing the socially constructed gender since various issues surrounding gender still remain in society.

The relevancy of this essay therefore comes from trying to point out features that show the typical, as well as the non-typical descriptions and portrayals of O'Neill's and William's characters seen from a feminist theory point of view. The two writers have an ability to show those features without making it too obvious, meaning that it does not become unbelievable and unreliable for the reader. To be able to show the typical descriptions we need to point out the features that are typical for the male and female gender roles. The stereotypical features of how men and women are supposed to act are also strongly seen in both plays. Both writers have a tendency to show those stereotypical features at first, later revealing hidden emotions and enlightening actions that might not be seen as appropriate for men or women.

⁴ Schweickart, (1997) 617.

⁵ Robbins, (1999) 48.

3. The Two Plays

O'Neill's and Williams's texts use traditional approaches, where gender is represented from what is and what is not appropriate behavior for men and women. They both provide their readers with classical romance when discussing the timeless yet typical issues of life and love.

3.1 Tennessee Williams – *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Thomas Lanier Williams, later known as Tennessee Williams, was born in 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi. He was an American play writer that wrote various prominent plays. Many of his works are considered to be classics. In 1948 he won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama with his play *A Streetcar Named Desire* and seven years later he received a second Pulitzer Prize for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* offers its readers a glimpse of the American South, through both narrative approach and plot. The way he writes and uses language as an influential instrument, all reflects back to the south and the appealing dialects that define the setting of the play. The culture of the Southern United States influences his plays and connections are too strong not to be noticed:

BLANCHE. Don't you just love these long rainy afternoons in New Orleans when an hour isn't just an hour – but a little bit of eternity dropped in your hands – and who knows what do to with it? ⁶

The reflections of the South can be seen in many ways, but especially through his male characters since they are first displayed with an expected roughness and masculine touch. As the story develops, Williams presents a much more sensitive and vulnerable side to his male characters. The vulnerability is strongly connected to the male desire of having a woman acknowledge their needs and feelings. This makes the content of Williams' story develop in a somewhat surprising, yet stimulating way. This can be seen in Stanley's desperate cry of regret, showing his essential need of having Stella by his side.

⁶ Williams, (1981) Act II, Scene 1

STANLEY. Eunice, I want my girl down here!

EUNICE. She ain't comin' down, so you quit! /.../

STANLEY. Stel-lahh!

EUNICE. You can't beat on a woman and then call her back. She won't come, and her going to have a baby! /.../

STANLEY. STELL-AHHHH! STELL --- (*Stella comes down. Pauses near bottom step. Stanley falls to his knees, pressing his face into her belly. He weeps. /.../*)

STANLEY. Don't ever leave me... don't ever leave me...
sweetheart... baby...⁷

The vulnerability that O'Neill shows us here is contrasted against how he regularly portrays Stanley as a macho character with power over Stella.

There is also a certain feminine touch in Williams' female characters that is connected with the typical Southern culture. The way the characters act and talk fits into the legacy of the south. The differences between men and women are blatantly described. There are no misunderstandings when portraying the unacceptable and acceptable behaviors when allocating their respective gender roles.

STANLEY. (*To STELLA.*) Hiyah, sweetheart.

STELLA. (*Jumping up.*) Oh, Stanley! /.../ Oh, Stan! (*She runs into his arms and kisses him, which he accepts with lordly composure, and pats her behind familiarly.*) I'm taking Blanche to Galatorie's for supper and then to a show because it's your poker night. /.../

STANLEY. /.../ How about my supper, huh? /.../

STELLA. (*Kneels on chair by STANLEY.*) I put you a cold plate on ice.⁸

It is clear what is expected from both the female and the male characters of his work. Deborah R. Geis writes about the obviousness of gender roles in Williams' play.

What is striking to me is not simply how often Williams's play (and the subsequent Elia Kazan film) of *A Streetcar Named Desire* has been recycled, so that it has taken on the status of a cultural artifact, but also how deeply these re-citings of Williams's text are caught up in issues of

⁷ Williams, (1981) Act I, Scene 3

⁸ Williams, (1981) Act I, Scene 2

gender and sexuality, as well as issues of performance and the performative.⁹

Even the smallest details play a great part in increasing the credibility of its context, making the two quotations above reliable. It gives its reader that unique feeling of taking part in a narrative where details make it feel authentic. It is obvious that Williams has created a typical masculine, dominating existence through his characters, which it is important to analyze from a feminist theory point of view. Robbins (1999) describes the importance of analyzing a text from a feminist point of view when examining matters related to feminism.

At the heart of feminist literary theory, therefore, is a will to political agency - reading in a particular way, writing about what one has read with this in mind, these things can make a difference.¹⁰

It is with thrilling excitement that the reader should twist and turn the substance of his text, individualizing the reading process from a feminist theory point of view.

3.2 Eugene O'Neill – *Long Day's Journey into Night*

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was born on October 16, 1888 in New York. His upbringing and later tribulations are something that is often demonstrated through his plays, mainly through the construction of some of his characters. O'Neill was awarded The Nobel Prize in Literature 1936: "for the power, honesty and deep-felt emotions of his dramatic works, which embody an original concept of tragedy".¹¹ Furthermore, in 1956, he received The Pulitzer Prize in Drama.

O'Neill does not use the southern approach that Williams uses. However, like Williams, he gives his reader a feeling of belonging and taking part in the story through his way of unfolding features. A clear example is given in Act I, scene I, where the characters are thoroughly described:

⁹ Geis, (2009) 239.

¹⁰ Robbins, (1999) 50.

¹¹ Nobel Prize Foundation,
http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1936/#

Mary /.../ She still has a young, graceful figure, a trifle plump, but showing little evidence of middle-aged waist and hips, although she is not tightly corseted. /.../ What strikes one immediately is her extreme nervousness. Her hands are never still. They were once beautiful hands, with long, tapering fingers, but rheumatism has knotted the joints and warped the fingers, so that now they have an ugly crippled look.

James Tyrone /.../ He is by nature and preference a simple, unpretentious man, whose inclinations are still close to his humble beginnings and his Irish farmer forebears. /.../ He has never been really sick in his life. He has no nerves. There is a lot of solid, earthy peasant in him, mixed with streaks of sentimental melancholy and rare flashes of intuitive sensibility.

12

He displays his characters with both unpleasant and attractive features – by appearance and personality. The excitement comes from watching his story develop, and Williams writes in a very similar way when looking further into those specific gender related features.

At first, the story revolves around the men being the head of the family, but as the story develops the importance of motherhood becomes significant as well as the reliance on the love of women, especially wives. O’Neill portrays Mary as a troubled woman, filled with difficulties and anxiety and her weaknesses are strongly shown. Gloria Cahill explains O’Neill’s portrayal of women by looking into O’Neill’s own life and his lack of mother figures. The search for a true mother figure is invariable a factor in O’Neill’s play. Cahill summarizes it by arguing the following:

What ultimately arises from this point of view is not a study of five separate fictional characters, but rather a composite picture of one woman, a progression from fragmentation to wholeness.¹³

I believe that this is the greatest source of many issues regarding patriarchy and looking at the women as the weaker sex. Feminist theories try to establish an acceptable plateau for society to stand on all together, but it seems to be a

¹² O’Neill, (1966) Act I

¹³ Cahill, (1998) 96.

progression where success is not yet within reach. As long as women are being categorized as one specific gender with specific required features, the problems will still remain. I believe that Cahill's description shows that society must start to view women as individuals instead of comprising them as the composite picture of one woman. It becomes clear after reading both plays, that feminist theories and deep criticism are still necessary in today's society as they were seventy years ago when they plays were being produced.

4. Portraying gender

Looking at the descriptions of their characters, there is no doubt that it is possible to discover many resemblances between the two plays. I (unfortunately) consider both O'Neill's and Williams' portrayal of gender to be believable when it comes to telling the reader about gender roles during the twentieth century. There are strong stereotypical features to be seen in both the male and female characters.

Williams and O'Neill embrace the stereotypical features when portraying their protagonists, but not without a contrast that is occasionally seen – which makes their way of portraying gender thought-provoking and stimulating. There is a clear example in Williams's play, where Stella fits into the category of stereotypes while Blanche illustrates the opposite behavior after Stanley physically abuses Stella.

STELLA. /.../ In the first place when men are drinking and playing poker anything can happen. /.../ He didn't know what he was doing... He was as good as a lamb when I came back and he's really very, very ashamed of himself.

BLANCHE. And that – makes it all right? /.../ In my opinion? You're married to a mad man.

STELLA. No! /.../

BLANCHE. (*Pushing broom aside.*) Stop it! Put it down! I won't have you cleaning up after him!

STELLA. Then who's going to do it? Are you? ¹⁴

¹⁴ Williams, (1981) Act II, Scene 2.

This quotation reveals that thought-provoking behavior since Williams categorizes Blanche and Stella into two significantly different types of women. Stella's acceptance of Stanley's behavior illustrates her willingness to excuse her husband's actions. She reduces the seriousness of his actions and undermines her own authority by tolerating Stanley's dominance, while identifying herself as the weaker sex. Blanche does the opposite while trying to convince Stella that Stanley lacks the right to weaken her. She argues against the excusing of his actions and tries to enlighten Stella about the fact that she actually has a choice in not being undermined by her husband. Blanche therefore represents another type of women, which was not commonly seen back then. Williams sorts women into two different categories: Stella's acceptance and weakness, and Blanche's un-acceptance and strength. They are shown with significant different features which represents two completely diverse women.

5. Stereotypes

Stereotypes are connected to expectations of female and male characteristics. There are different aspects of the stereotypes to be discovered and that is what makes these plays interesting from a perspective of social construction of gender. It has to do with expectations from society, which still lays down expectations on what specific roles we are expected to fit into depending on our gender. Even today, it is considered peculiar if you do not take part in those fields that are seen as appropriate for you, either as a man or a woman.

Mary and Stella fulfill a great deal of those expectations. The men of the Tyrone family, Stanley Kowalski and Harold Mitchell are stereotypical men, but with a feminine touch in a way that they to some extent admit that women are essential to their pursuit of happiness. An example is given from a conversation between the two brothers from the Tyrone family:

EDMUND /.../ What did you do uptown tonight? Go to Mamie Burns?

JAMIE (*very drunk, his head nodding*). Sure thing. Where else could I find suitable feminine companionship? And love. Don't forget love. What is a man without a good woman's love? A God-damned hollow shell.¹⁵

The conversation seems ironic about the importance of female companionship and love. However, the irony could easily be translated into a harsh truth since it is obvious, when watching the story develop, that the men of the Tyrone family strongly depend on Mary's happiness in relation to their own (unfulfilled) joy. The realization of their dependency connected to their mother/wife becomes too much to handle and it translates into an ironic statement that pushes the truth away from their reality.

Anger is a theme with almost all the male characters in these two plays, which is interesting since anger is one of a few emotions that are acceptable for men to show. It is in many ways considered to be a manly feature, which might be considered remarkable since anger and other emotions are in fact human features and not specific to the male gender. O'Neill and Williams collaborate with the expectations from society, but they also show the unacceptable behaviors of men – seen through the eyes of society. Vulnerability and delicacy connected to the male gender is not something that received acceptance from society. Men were strong, women were weak – a declarative statement that has been outlined throughout history, even in today's society. Williams and O'Neill declared that statement through their plays, but at the same time they made it clear that even though women occasionally could be stronger than men, they still struggle with becoming independent individuals.

A clear example of this is to be seen in Williams's character Blanche. She is a woman that has a sexual appetite, is not afraid to speak her mind and shows little respect regarding expectations even though she sometimes tries to fit into the female role of what to be expected from her. To diagnose her as mentally ill shows quite clearly that she does not fit in with society's expectations how a woman should think and act. There is little that shows that she actually is mentally ill, except the other character's way of looking at her. A woman like that must be mentally ill, since her behaviour is considered unsuitable in many different ways. At least that is how the

¹⁵ O'Neill, (1966) Act IIII.

society around her in Williams's play interprets it. There was no room for straightforward women:

STELLA. (*Coldy*) Go on and say it all, Blanche.

BLANCHE. /.../ He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There's even something --- sub-human --- something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! Yes --- something --- ape-like about him, like one of those pictures I've seen in -- anthropological studies! Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is --- Stanley Kowalski --- Survivor of the Stone Age! /.../ And you --- *you* here --- *waiting* for him. Maybe he'll strike you, or maybe grunt and kiss you. That is if kisses have been discovered yet!¹⁶

The expectations on a healthy woman do not include courage, attitude and a sexual appetite. Therefore, she is diagnosed as mentally ill which gives an explanation for her behavior. It simplifies it, and maybe even makes it curable?

This is an interesting yet repulsive way of defining femininity and womanhood, a definition that can be seen in today's society as well as in the 1940's. Expectations on appearances connected to the male and female gender is still a problematic issue. The culture that surrounds us could be seen as a result of our legacy, and developments of those problematic issues. It is hard to get rid of a legacy which is so strongly connected to rights and wrongs. The excitement in both Williams' and O'Neill's plays can often be traced back to a number of sites where gender is being portrayed differently, meaning that something unexpected appears that makes us look at the characters in a different way.

Geis (2009) discusses a number of sites in *A Streetcar Named Desire* where the meanings do not follow the expectations - as if it is something that the audience requires and find fascinating.

Perhaps some of the "fascination" of *Streetcar* is a number of these sites – masculinity, femininity, madness, desire – where these slippages of meanings /.../ tend to occur: where the lines don't fall neatly into place.¹⁷

¹⁶ Williams, (1981) Act I, Scene 4.

¹⁷ Geis, (2009) 239.

Geis brings up an interesting theory that could be used when discussing not only Williams' play, but also O'Neill's. There are also a number of similar sites to be seen in *Long Day's Journey into Night* that fascinate its audience by having something unexpected occur associated with gender, that makes the audience view the characters in a different way.

6. Theme-based comparisons

There is never a doubt of how Williams or O'Neill wanted to portray gender in their plays. Gender comes out as strong and powerful constructions through characters that might be seen as typical of their kind. This does not mean that these two plays come across as equal or alike when constructing strong characters and gender.

Stephen Maddison discusses the many ways in which a responsive and alert reader/audience could capture some of the challenging content of Williams' play. The fashionable side of Williams' play is that he shows his audience something that was considered new and bold at that time.

Part of the task of an agile and dissident reader, one who wishes to formulate an interpretation which is culturally challenging, is to pose questions suggested by the ideological and narrative arrangements of a text that conventional wisdom and dominant productions and criticism have not posed or answered.¹⁸

For example, the way he portrays female sexuality came across as different for its time. The standing ovations from the audience during the opening night of the play were proof that he had created something new and attractive. A Streetcar Named Desire dared to show female sexuality and its urges, through the characters of Stella, but especially through Blanche:

BLANCHE. Young, young, young, young --- man! Has anyone ever told you that you look like a young prince out of the Arabian Nights?

COLLECTOR. No, ma'am. (*Looks away.*)

¹⁸ Maddison, (2000) 44.

BLANCHE. Well, you do, honey lamb. Come here! Come on over here like I told you! (*She drapes herself in scarf. He obeys like a child.*)
BLANCHE, *gripping his arms, looking into his face, her expression one of almost ineffable sweetness.*) I want to kiss you --- just once – softly and sweetly on your mouth... (*She does.*) Run along now! It would be nice to keep you, but I've got to be good and keep my hands off children.¹⁹

The male character of Stanley shows the audience many of the features of a typical man: strong, masculine and powerful, yet emotional and vulnerable, which was a combination that was not often seen.

O'Neill, on the other hand, gives his characters somewhat of a softer touch that is seen through the entire play but especially during the end. O'Neill portrays his character Mary with weakness, self-pity, limitations and sorrow.

TYRONE. Mary! For God's sake, forget the past!
MARY (*with strange objective calm*). Why? How can I? The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future, too. We all try to lie out of that but life won't let us. (*Going on.*) I blame only myself. I swore after Eugene died I would never have another baby. I was to blame for his death. /.../
TYRONE (*with bitter sadness*). /.../ Can't you let our dead baby rest in peace?
MARY (*as if she hadn't heard him*). It was my fault. I should have insisted on staying with Eugene and not have let you persuade me to join you, just because I loved you.²⁰

Those are not all of her qualities but the deeper you get into the story, the more of these qualities are being displayed. The male characters of his play also show signs of the sorrows that Mary carries, but in another way. They are not supposed to show their weaknesses in such an obvious way since they are men and therefore they have certain obligations towards their family. The family is depending on the strengths of the men, but as the story develops you realize that the male strength and its foundation are lost.

¹⁹ Williams, (1981) Act II, Scene 1.

²⁰ O'Neill, (1966) Act II, Scene 2.

6.1 Social construction

Understanding society is of high importance when interpreting female and male characteristics. What we consider as appropriate has been shaped throughout history, in the eyes of society. It is not something that is easily forgotten. No matter what, there are still ideas of rights and wrongs connected to gender and the importance of the roles that we try to display in different ways.

An interesting aspect comes from considering the different decades in which the plays were written and set. Robbins (1999) explains the importance of *when* and *where* something is being interpreted.

Texts, feminist theories argue, are always produced out of a specific reality, and they bear the marks of their time, place and mode of production. They are always to be understood as relating to historic and geographic specificity, both in terms of the moment when they are first produced, and the moments when they are produced by our readings of them.²¹

However, the expectations may have changed a bit, but what is seen as stereotypical today is not significant differently from how it was decades ago when the plays were produced. The surprising moments in these plays are still the same: when the patterns of acceptable gender behavior are transformed into something sincere and authentic that all humans share, male or female: love, passion, vulnerability and sorrow. Those features are not male or female, they are in fact human. These human needs emerge gradually in both O'Neill's and Williams' plays. The construction of the plays shows their audiences that no matter how strong the expectations of society might be, the human need of expressing true feelings should not be seen as a weakness. The expected gender roles might shape us to some extent, but they do not determine who we are – which both O'Neill and Williams's give us great examples of in the course of their plays and the portraying of their characters. The most interesting part of Williams's construction of gender is that he shows us two women that are very different in many ways but they could both be seen as a stereotypical woman, depending on how you expect women to act and behave. It is a concept that fits into

²¹ Robbins, (1999) 48.

our society today as well as when it was written. It involves the ongoing debate on what is appropriate vs. inappropriate for women.

6.2 Power/acting space

When depicting power, the two authors differ and O'Neill provides his female characters with power in a completely different way than Williams does. In the Tyrone family in O'Neill's play, great power rests with the mother and wife, Mary Tyrone. Everything revolves around her tragic fate. She has lived a life filled with difficulties that has made her weaker than what she once used to be. Somewhere along the way, she realizes that her life has not become what she once dreamt it would be.

MARY (*bitterly*). /.../ None of us can help the things life has done to us. They're done before you realize it, and once they're done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, and you've lost your true self for ever.²²

She has gone from being a young woman with hopes and ambitions into a mother and wife, with nothing in between. She is still mourning the death of her middle child and faces nothing but regret and sorrow.

Mary is the motherly type that tries to do everything to make her two sons feel loved and at the same time be a good wife to her beloved husband. The family joy is dissolving, and Mary tries to escape the harsh reality in a way that affects the entire family. The men of the Tyrone family become powerless when trying to provide Mary with happiness and love that she craves so badly.

MARY /.../ I really should have new glasses. My eyes are so bad now.
TYRONE (*with Irish blarney*) Your eyes are beautiful, and well you know it.
(*He gives her a kiss. Her face lights up with a charming, shy embarrassment. Suddenly and startlingly one sees in her face the girl she had once been, not a ghost of the dead, but still a living part of her.*)
MARY. You must't be silly, James. Right in front of Jamie!

²² O'Neill, (1966) Act II, Scene 1.

TYRONE. Oh, he's on to you, too. He knows this fuss about eyes and hair is only fishing for compliments. Eh, Jamie?

JAMIE (*his face has cleared, too, and there is only a boyish charm in his loving smile at his mother*). Yes. You can't kid us, Mama.²³

Their vague attempt to woo her in the way she deserves becomes nothing more than an illusion of what she really needs and wants. However, they love their wife/mother more than anything but they never seem to know the right thing to do and they all seem intimidated by her two-faced personality.

This respect for the mother clearly provides Mary with a power that she is nowhere near being ready to bear. The entire family's happiness depends on her happiness and it seems to be hard to get it all to work out. Because of that, they all get stuck between trying to live in the present and in the same time escaping the present. The husband and her two sons do not know whether to pity or blame Mary, since they struggle with their own demons and unresolved business that have made them into bitter yet loving people. The motherly love is to be seen in Williams's play as well,

MITCH. /.../ Well, I ought to go home soon. /.../ I got a sick mother. She don't go to sleep until I get in at night.

STANLEY. Then why don't you stay home with her?

MITCH. She says to go out, so I go, but I don't enjoy it. All the while I keep wondering how she is. /.../ You all are married. But I'll be alone when she goes.²⁴

Both plays provide the reader with a persuasion of the importance of motherhood and that mothers may be the women that the men are most likely to respect.

The description of these female protagonists shows that they are living in a patriarchal society but yet they seem to be the key to the happiness of many of their surrounding male characters. The male characters in both O'Neill's and Williams' plays show a weaker side as the plays unfold. The weaker sides of them need confirmation by their women to be able to uphold the patriarchy that they believe in. The female characters, such as Mary Tyrone and Stella Kowalski, do not seem to be

²³ O'Neill, (1966) Act I

²⁴ Williams, (1981) Act I, Scene 3.

fully aware of the power they carry as the key to male contentment. Robbins describes patriarchy as a living phenomenon that is constantly surrounding us, no matter where we are.

*.../ and feminist theories identify patriarchy at work in the home, the state, the church or other religious systems, the law, education, the workplace, in culture at large, and even in women themselves since women often internalize the values they are fed by powerful external institutions.*²⁵

Both Mary and Stella accept these values, instead of being aware of how meaningful their power is – a power that they are not aware of since they choose to follow the patterns of patriarchy, giving authority to the male characters surrounding them. However, if we choose to view it the other way around – the lack of power cannot be overlooked. If Stella would have decided to leave her husband she would have had to suffer the consequences of her choice, since there was no room in society for female divorcees. Furthermore, giving birth to a child as Stella did would have made circumstances even more difficult. Stella's decision not to leave Stanley might disappoint feminist readers. What might be even worse is that Stella had to stay by her husband's side not to risk a future of alienation from the surrounding society.

6.3 Emotional response

By emotional response I refer to the emotional interaction that is (or is not) carried out between the male and female characters. There are expectations on how emotional response should be displayed depending on whether you are male or female. Cahill presents it by discussing Jung's point of view of the anima/animus, which in this case shows the feminine sides of the male characters as they reluctantly admit their dependence on the female characters. At the same time, it shows the strength of some of the female characters where gender roles could be shifted in opposite directions. Cahill's theory explains how masculine and feminine psychological qualities are not necessarily connected to gender – they are human features.

²⁵ Robbins, (1999) 51.

In brief, this concept is based on the belief that every person comprises both masculine and feminine psychological qualities and that it is necessary to allow these qualities to develop in harmony with each other for the human being to achieve completeness.²⁶

This concept is especially seen in how O'Neill portrays Mary as a typical woman, not being aware of the significance of her own powers. She wants to be a loving mother and wife but still dreams about a different life. It is a story about the difficulties between being a mother and a wife, yet still being able to identify herself as more than that. Mary fails when it comes to the last part. She struggles to keep herself together and puts a great deal of her happiness in the hands of the past: a past which does not work well together with the life she has now.

If we compare the female character in O'Neill's play with the characters in William's play we notice that they have different approaches when it comes to identity and power. We have Stella, the kind of woman who knows what she is expected to do and finds herself in a situation where her role is being defined by a patriarchal society. She knows what is right and wrong, but has difficulties separating what is right for herself and what is expected from her.

The male and female stereotypes are extraordinarily strong in William's play and Stella appears as the type of woman who fits into society. She tries making her husband Stanley happy which seems to be an ongoing, never-ending duty, similar to O'Neill's portrayal of Mary. However, Stella and Mary have different approaches to how they view their own lives. Stella shows few regrets and sorrow, while Mary wishes to change her. One could argue that there might be a young Mary Tyrone to be seen in Stella. Stella risks a future of regrets, knowing that she will suffer the consequences of her own actions towards people she loves, in this case towards her sister whom she fails to stand up for. The strongest proof of this is in the last scene of the play when Blanche is forced away from her sister, due to Stanley's decision to declare Blanche mentally ill and violently enforcing an abduction by a doctor:

²⁶ Cahill, (1998) 98.

STELLA. Don't let them hurt her! Oh, God! Oh, please, God, don't let them hurt her. What are they doing to her? /.../ What have I done to my sister! Oh, God, what have I done to my sister!

EUNICE. (*Moving with STELLA --- still holding her.*) You done the right thing, the only thing you could do. She couldn't stay here, there wasn't no other place for her to go. /.../

STANLEY. Stella? (*STELLA sobs with inhuman abandon. There is something luxurious in her complete surrender to crying now that her sister is gone. /.../*)²⁷

Stella is also affected by her past in some ways, and when Blanche shows up she personalizes a great deal of the past which Stella has tried to escape. Blanche has no desire of fitting into a man's world the same way Stella does. She is her own person, which may seem ironic in many ways since she is considered having a split personality. I am not sure that she does, since I see her as a strong and independent woman who has suffered a past that is everything but appropriate for a woman.

Female sexuality is seen in both Blanche and Stella while O'Neill shows his female character as more sensual than sexual. O'Neill describes Mary with tenderness while Williams has a more harsh way of describing what is seen as female characteristics. At the same time, in both plays women are depicted as unpredictable and delusional. Women are not to be trusted in the absence of strong, reliable men – who in reality are nothing but as weak as any other and a great deal of their happiness depends on their women.

7. Conclusion

Even if the two plays differ in many ways, there are many similarities to be seen when looking at gender roles and how they chose to portray their protagonists. They construct their plays through a strong patriarchal society.

The power is first being presented as a belonging to the male gender but the female characters are slowly empowered due to the fact that the male characters are much weaker than what was first shown. Neither the male nor the female characters

²⁷ Williams, (1981) Act III, Scene 5.

might be fully aware of it, but it is clear in the end, in both plays, that the female characters hold power connected to the male happiness.

The authors of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* have both portrayed women as human beings with desires, powers and importance. The female characters handle this differently, but seen from a feminist point of view they have the tools to become independent, since the men surrounding them are in need of their love and affection. The basic thought in a patriarchal society is that the man holds the authority and the women are the weaker gender.

O'Neill and Williams show their readers that it is much more to be seen behind the scenes of a patriarchal society. You must not let yourself be fooled into believing in what is first noticed: there is always more to it.

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