The institution of marriage: Kowalskis and Waythorns

(Interpretative essay)

The two works to be discussed in this essay have more than 40-years gap between the dates of their first publication – *The Other Two* by Edith Wharton was featured in the Collier’s Weekly Magazine in 1904 and *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams was staged on Broadway in 1947. As both works narrate a contemporary story, this relatively wide jump within the American History of Literature allows us to compare the institution of marriage. It is portrayed in the middle-class household of the not so standard white Anglo-Saxon Protestants from the beginning of the century and later in the working-class household of the first generation native-born of Polish descent who engages through marriage with an “heiress” of the Old Southern order. In both works, the marriage results in “domestication” and change of social status for the female part. But while for Alice Waythorn it was an upwards climb, for Stella De Bois it was not so in the eyes of society represented by her sister Blanche. Unlike her, Stella and Alice are capable of smoothly adapting to their new lives in the present time. Both women become dedicated to the marital institution only, and neither of them goes to work or has a career - so far as similarities are concerned. I will dedicate the rest of this essay to the great number of contrasts between the two newly-wed couples, namely the Kowalskis and the Waythorns.

In spite of Stella’s “background obviously quite different from her husband's.” [[1]](#footnote-1), the Kowalskis are a working-class couple living in New Orleans on a street named *Elysian Fields*. The description of the house and the surroundings does not correspond to the mythological Ancient Greeks’ heavenly place for god-likes after death. However, amidst the ugliness of the scene, the recently-married couple oddly appears to be happy. Another symbol is that a streetcar named *Desire* leads there. The epigraph is a remarkably suitable match to finish the line of introductory symbols:

And so it was I entered the broken world

To trace the visionary company of love, its voice

An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)

But not for long to hold each desperate choice[[2]](#footnote-2)

Before the action has even started, the reader is set into the mood of the play. The central theme is the all-controlling power of passion over the pride of origin, the habits of the “good life,” and the relations of blood. It is depicted in the results of Stella’s choices to leave behind and never look back on home, property and family affairs in the name of marrying a person for his looks and domineering behavior culminating in irresistible sexual attraction. It is not out of courage to stick to her choices regardless of sacrifices that keeps her tight around Stanley’s arms but rather the inability to exercise own will under the pressure of something opposing all reason. It is not explicitly named, but her caring, submissive and forgiving disposition towards her husband make her the perfect wife in the old-fashion sense. She is caught in a sweet voluntary surrender to every desire of her husband. The contemporary educated reader could probably try to give this behavior a scientific explanation in the reductionists’ fashion by labeling it body heat chemistry, or female hormones, or whatever that key of happiness might be that allows her to thrive in a socioeconomic environment completely unnatural to her upbringing socioeconomic environment. Her sister Blanche does not fall under Stanley’s macho-spell. In fact, she despises him for it, which is another proof for the exclusively physical nature of the relationship between Stella and Stanley. The couple does not share cultural interests or hobbies. Each of them has their own idea of a pleasant pastime and Stella is reluctant to impose restrictions on the flamboyant fun Stanley’s is having with his friends. Instead, she is readily glad to pay the price of stormy fights and abusive/humiliating behavior waiting for the speechless reconciliation in the darkness of their bedroom. As waiting and hoping are so intertwined in putting trust in uncertain future reward, Stella’s actions, or rather, reactions are indeed not more than *a desperate choice tracing the visionary company of love*. [[3]](#footnote-3)

By contrast, Alice Waythorn puts no trust in fate/her husband, for in the beginning of the 20th century fate equates and is determined by the husband. If she did, she wouldn’t lie to him nor try to break free of “dominion” changing one husband after the other whenever she feels unsatisfied. She is presented as a brave woman, the epitome of what a feminist should be like in her time, who is not afraid of confronting social expectations by getting married for the third time. At the beginning of their life together she is admired by her new husband:”He knew that society has not yet adapted itself to the consequences of divorce and that till the adaptation takes place every woman who uses the freedom the law accords her must be her own social justification. Waythorn had an amused confidence in his wife's ability to justify herself. His expectations were fulfilled”. However, her living ex-husbands start showing up to examine Waythorn’s benevolent attitudes towards his wife.

Stella trusts her husband more than her sister. In the two works compared, honesty brings paradoxical results. In the case of Alice her secrecy is a reason for Waythorn to treat her as an individual burdened by personal history, while open-hearted Stella is treated as a property of no past as if she was born the day Stanley laid eyes on her. The wish for her hand translates into a wish to make her his own alone regardless of any social bondage she used to have. In Alice’s case, her husband is respectful of her (marital) record and the heritage of it – her daughter Lily. Waythorn is willing to take care of her as if she was his own while Stanley doesn’t care too much even for his own baby when he beats pregnant Stella. It is not hard to see Stanley as a conqueror and Waythorn as a diplomat. The latter treats mistrust with silence instead of starting a noisy fight because it was not that disagreeable to him that Alice lied but the fact that she didn’t foresee his wish:”She had lied to him then, but she had respected his wishes since, and the incident cast a curious light on her character. He was sure she would not have seen Haskett that first day if she had divined that Waythorn would object, and the fact that she did not divine it was almost as disagreeable to the latter as the discovery that she had lied to him.” This is an interesting sign of espousal conformity. Nothing of it is present among Stanley and Stella. He beats her because she said that he and his company are drunk animals around the poker table[[4]](#footnote-4) which is an obvious truth. Stanley orders like a king on a throne: “I want water”[[5]](#footnote-5). His satisfaction is shown to be of paramount importance no matter the consequences, and he is disrespectful towards his wife by thinking about sex with her sister Blanche. He rapes her to prove he has the upper hand, superiority, and ownership over the situation but also for plain fun:” Come to think of it--maybe you wouldn't be bad to--interfere with...”[[6]](#footnote-6) This demonstrates the degree to which Stanley is impulsive and decides instinctively on the moment without giving much time for reasoning.

On the other hand, it is worth noticing that the reader is not given Waythorn’s first name, it is enough that he is Mister Waythorn to imagine him a gentleman. As such, he does not play the leading figure of an alpha-male by making his wife embarrassed for her petty little lie. Instead, he gives her credit to juggle with all of the three of them. By the end of the story, when she is finally caught in the company of all her ex-husbands Waythorn, Haskett, and Varick, she does not show signs of discomfort in the peculiar situation. This tolerance may be a sign of advanced thinking ahead of its time on the part of Waythorn who is a modern husband, but almost fifty years later Stanley is nothing of the kind. He is definitely the leading figure in his household, and all of the inhabitants should obey. Stella is performing the duties of a “mistress and maid”[[7]](#footnote-7) which is Stanley’s idea of a housewife. Alice, in comparison, has a French governess to help her with the child because she is a society woman who pleases her husband by being a comfortable “*old shoe*” *[[8]](#footnote-8)* for none of the reasons Stella is a “comfortable” wife. It is the social skills that she had acquired during the previous marriages that made her so easy-going together in combination with a domineering charisma:

"I'm so sorry -- I'm always late; but the afternoon was so lovely." She stood drawing her gloves off, propitiatory and graceful, diffusing about her a sense of ease and familiarity in which the situation **lost its grotesqueness**. "But before talking business," she added brightly, "I'm sure everyone wants a cup of tea."She dropped into her low chair by the tea-table, and the two visitors, as if drawn by her smile, advanced to receive the cups she held out. She glanced about for Waythorn, and he took the third cup with a laugh. [[9]](#footnote-9)

Her role in this situation reminds of a queen-bee surrounded by her best drones for the honey smiles she gives. Her sole comments are humorous, and her current husband reacts to the jokes respectively no matter how disillusioned he might be feeling. The reader does not know if he laughs out of irony or out of the amazement he still nurses about her like before meeting the other two.

Her composure was restful to him; it acted as ballast to his somewhat unstable sensibilities. As he pictured her bending over the child's bed he thought how soothing her presence must be in illness: her very step would prognosticate recovery. His own life had been a gray one, from temperament rather than circumstance, and he had been drawn to her by the unperturbed gayety which kept her fresh and elastic at an age when most women's activities are growing either slack or febrile.[[10]](#footnote-10)

My interpretation is that if he did not like his wife anymore after getting to know the circumstances formative for her character, he would have acted upon it and demonstrated his will for separation. He would have imposed on explanations or begged out promises. Instead, he stays a passive observer of her story unfolding before his eyes and ends up embracing it like a stakeholder having a percent of a company who has to share it with the other contributors. [[11]](#footnote-11) “He was directly indebted to his predecessors for the devotion which made his life easy if not inspiring.”[[12]](#footnote-12). Stanley and Stella’s life is if not easy at least inspiring turbulent emotions. Waythorn’s character is such that he does not need excitement or “inspiration” but a domineering alpha female, in the same way, Stella needs her alpha male. The two works develop two opposite scenarios – the one in which the wife is in charge and the later in which the husband is in charge. The contrast between this two espousal arrangements proves that the institution of marriage depends on the needs and aspirations of the partners more than on the social pressure of their time - “whatever works”[[13]](#footnote-13) is allowed.

Bibliography:

Wharton, Edith. *The Other Two*. 1904. (available online in handouts)

Williams, Tennessee. *A streetcar named Desire*. 1947. (available online in handouts)

1. Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire,* 1947, p.1 of handouts. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. (epigraph) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. p. 56 of handouts [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid p.58 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. p. 140 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Paul McCartney, Off the Ground: Mistress and maid”, 1993 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Edith Wharton, *The Other Two*, 1904, p. 14 of handouts [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. p. 17; All emphases in quotations are mine - K.G. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. p.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. p.14 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. p.15 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A great movie on the same topic by woody Allen with the same title “Whatever works” from 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)