A Character Named Stanley: a Comparative Investigation about Characterization in the Adaptations of "A Streetcar Named Desire"

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> "Characters are the life of literature: they are the objects of our curiosity and fascination, affection and dislike, admiration and condemnation," (Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royale 2004, p. 60)

Characters indeed compose a robust part of narratives, guiding the reader or viewer through the sequence of events, captivating the audience either by being attractive or repulsive, making the audience feel and think, ultimately guiding the reader or viewer through an Aristotelian cathartic process. Characters typically ignite the actions that propel the story forward, as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2013) point out, being the actual basis for the narrative. Overall, characters play an important role in storytelling in whatever media, be it literature, spoken storytelling, graphic novels, or the acclaimed seventh art. Steven Spielberg exemplifies the importance of characters when reminiscing about his "Raiders of the Lost Ark" (1981): "I remember hearing people quote lines from the film or seeing kids pretend to be the characters, and realizing that the film had gone beyond box office success and had entered popular culture."

This article examines characterization in the sense advocated by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royale (2004). Characterization is here understood as character construction. That is, the assembling of the features that make a character what it is. The character analyzed here is Stanley Kowalski, originally created by screenwriter Tennessee Williams in 1947 with the play entitled *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Tennessee Williams was an American author best known for being a playwright of manifold acclaimed plays, such as *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), and the work examined on the present article, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). Williams was part of the American Theater Hall of Fame in 1979 and won several awards for his work, among which are two Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1955 for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and in 1948 for the very *A Streetcar Named Desire.*

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A Streetcar Named Desire is considered to be one of the best plays of the 20th century by notorious authors and magazines, such as the New York Times (1973) and scholars such as John S. Bak (2003). It was a great success on Broadway since its opening night on December 3rd 1947 and endured over two years being played on the same Broadway theaters and in 1949 a London production started showing the play as well. Apart from being performed in several productions, this piece of drama has been adapted to the screen three times. The first time it was adapted in 1951 in a movie directed by Elia Kazan. Most of the actors and actresses from the Broadway play were casted for the eponymous movie adaptation by Kazan. The (now) celebrated Marlon Brando, who was not originally considered for the role for being too young in relation to the character Williams had in mind for the drama, plays Stanley both in the Broadway drama and on Kazan's film. The story was later reenacted in 1995 by movie director Glenn Jordan, and another famous actor plays the role of Stanley, this time, Alec Baldwin.

This analysis is interested in these two characterizations of Stanley. In this endeavor, this paper does not propose to investigate which film character better portrays the character firstly written by Williams in 1947 for two reasons. The first reason is because the sole definition of "better" is problematic for its vagueness and subjectivity. That is, what a certain scholar might deem superior characterization might not coincide with another scholar's judgment. Furthermore, the spectrum of what is considered superior characterization can be very encompassing and little is done to narrow this definition. The second reason why this article refuses to judge which characterization best depicts the one Williams created is due to the problematic notion of faithfulness discussed in terms of adaptation.

Fidelity in adaptation is an impression much counter-argued nowadays since it proves to be very little logical. The basic idea that many literati in the field of adaptation, such as George Bluestone (1957, 2003), James Naremore (2000), and Linda Hutcheon (2006), advocate is that especially due to time and medium, adaptations are likely to be different from its source text. Robert Stam (2005), another intellectual who theorizes about adaptations, actually defends change in media transferring of narratives: "The shift from a single-track verbal medium such as the novel to a multitrack medium like film, which can play not only with words (written and spoken) but also with music, sound effects, and moving photographic images,

explains the unlikelihood, I would suggest even the **undesirability** of literal fidelity"[2] (p. 4). Therefore, in this article, instead of arguing which film character is better characterized as the character first shaped by Williams, I rather analyze what each film has done in the recreation of the character Stanley Kowalski and draw a comparison among these three characterizations, namely the 1947 play, the 1948 film, and the 1995 film characters, not to judge one more superior in detriment to the other, but simply to verify differences.

Stanley may be defined as the antagonist of this story since he is the one who debunks the lies of the narrative's protagonist, Blanche. Stanley also seems to work against her throughout the story until the point that he actually physically harms her when he sexually assaults her. He is a major character in the sense that he shares with Blanche the foreground, dominating the centrality of the story. Stanley is a stereotypical character of a macho sexist workingman. As a character he seems to be static, in the sense that from beginning to end, no significant change can be perceived in him. He is introduced in the beginning of the story as a brute laborer and finishes as such. Although the three aforementioned characterizations of Stanley share several traits, in Elia Kazan's adaptation, Stanley appears to be more characterized as a brute primitive working-class man than that in Glenn Jordan's due to differences in costume, lighting, and above all, acting.

Giddings et al. (1990) stress the fact that changes are bound to happen when adapting a novel to a film. Filmmakers have several techniques at hand to help them convey the different meaning they want to express with all the parts that compose a film. One very important of these parts is characterization. When examining the characterization of Stanley Kowalski, the first element that distinguishes the 1951 and 1995 versions is the costume. The earlier version presents Stan with white tight tanks or T-shirts, which allows the spectator an appreciation of the actor"s built body. He is also frequently less dressed than in the latest version. Both notions (tighter clothes or no clothes at all) associated with masculinity and virility, and even suggest aggressiveness. Thus, aiding the construction of the macho sexist character. Evidence of the difference costume made in both characterizations can be verified in Figure I below.

[2] Original mark by Robert Stam.

Figure I

Secondly, the observant watcher will notice that the way lighting is used plays a part in composing Stan's character. Nowadays Hollywoodian movies tend to use what Bordwell and Thompson call "three-point lighting" (p. 181). Three-point lighting is a lighting technique in which light is shed on the subject by three different angles. The result is that of a naturally illuminated subject, who is depicted in a seemingly realistic fashion to the spectator.

Classic Hollywood films from the 1950s approximately tended to mirror the German Expressionism style, which had its apogee in the 1920s before First World War. In this style of moviemaking, lighting plays a conspicuous role on the film's *misé-en-scene*. Rather than opting for middle range of contrast in the tonal control of the movie, the German Expressionists tended to use high contrast in their cinematography, yielding the film either bright white lighting of dark black shadows. Director Elia Kazan follows this latter style and chose to create a dim-lit setting, with contrasts of strongly illuminated patches (frequently women's faces) and shadows chucked on the subject's faces and bodies. The darker lighting used by Kazan casts a dubious more ominous hue to Stanley, helping depict Stan as someone who could take ruthless, brutal action and someone whom the audience should not trust. An example of the implications of lighting in the two characterizations of Stanley was provided in Figure II below.

Figure II: Stanley corners Blanche wanting information about Belle Reve

At last and more drastically, acting is perceived as a key aspect in the different reconstructions of this antagonist. Bordwell and Thompson (2013) point out that part of an actor or actress' performance is the visual elements, such as appearance, gestures, and facial expressions. Under the light of Bordwell and Thompson's definition, all elements pertaining to performance exemplify the more accentuated traits of Stanley's personality in Marlon Brando's acting in 1951. Firstly, in terms of appearance, Brando depicts a sturdier figure, rarely appearing on screen fully dressed, his muscles frequently showing, as verified on Figure III below. Furthermore, his posture is oftentimes more imposing, erect, transmitting a sense of confidence and power, also perceivable below on Figure IV.

Figure III: Initial scenes where Stanley and Blanche meet

Figure IV: Stanley talks to Stella about the “Napoleonic Code”

Secondly, the intensity of Brando’s gestures and actions is fiercer to Alec’s. When Stan passes by Blanche, when he draws Stella back to himself, or when he tosses Blanche away, Brando does that ever so much more violently than Alec. Throughout the feature, Alec always seems more civilized than the brute Brando. One example that regards this difference can be seen on Figure V below.

Figure V: Stanley drags Stella to continue the conversation about the “Napoleonic Code”

Thirdly, in two types of facial expressions does Brando portray a rougher Stanley. In anger or impatience, his face demonstrates the feelings more noticeably as Figure VI below depicts. And when on the one hand, Alec tends to appear more engaging and even smile, on the other hand, Brando remains nonchalant, with a *blazé* expression that shows indifference and superiority. This contrast is expressed

on Figure VII below. All of these elements amount to compose a characterization of Stanley that is more brute and violent on the first film adaptation of the play if compared to the most recent one.

Figure VI: Stanley gets annoyed at Blanche for beating around the bush

Figure VII: Initial scenes where Stanley meets Blanche for the first time

In conclusion, this paper has argued that when literary pieces are cinematized, changes in content and form typically occur. I have highlighted here that adaptations need not, and further on, will tend not to, be faithful to their source texts. When observing the two aforementioned film adaptations of the play *A Streetcar named Desire*, it is possible to notice that each director has made different choices when reconstructing the character of Stanley Kowalski. That being said, I have called attention to the fact that although the three characters can be easily related, with similarities being drawn among them, this paper has analyzed that in Glenn Jordan's

version, the adapted characterization of Stanley is less intense when compared to Elia Kazan's. Three visible differences broached in this paper were the costumes, lighting, and more significantly, acting. Here I observed that the choice of costume and make-up made alter the character's composition and that in Stanley's case, the 1951 version used tighter clothes, which helped build a stronger, more powerful workingman, more prone to violence. Moreover, this paper noticed how lighting can build different atmospheres and I explored the contrast between the two versions. Lastly, I analyzed their acting and perceived that the first performance is more intense if compared to the latest.

All that withstanding, it is possible to notice that in order to transport Stanley Kowalski from the novel *A Streetcar Named Desire* to the screen, the filmmaker can utilize a number of techniques and make a number of choices. From the array of possibilities, Elia Kazan has chosen to have Stanley portrayed in a more dramatic fashion, and he made use of costumes, lighting, and acting in order to convey that style. Glenn Jordan, on the other hand, opted to characterize Stanley in a milder way and used the same techniques Kazan had, but controlling them so as to express a blander Stanley. It is likely that other directors would, however, consider different options for this same character reconstruction. Whatever way chosen, it is important to bear in mind that there usually are a number of possibilities at hand when adapting a book into a movie. And perhaps most significantly, it is worth noting that the filmmaker and his or her crew have the liberty to explore these choices in order to reconstruct the setting, the story, and the characters in different media however desired, regardless of any notions of "fidelity" to the "original" work, as discussed previously.

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