

Assess the view that Tennessee Williams' use of symbolism in A Street Car Named Desire enhances the audience's understanding of the characters and themes in the play.

Symbolism plays a large role in A Streetcar Named Desire, although it may be a discreet one. The tragic elements of the story are illustrated through many symbols and add meaning to the story and foreshadow upcoming events. Many scenes have stood out, such as the famous poker scene and the characters language and imagery have helped to develop the story for the audience's understanding.

The main protagonist in the play is Blanche Dubois, a fading southern belle, as the story follows her visit to her sister in New Orleans and brings chaos and turmoil into lives of many other characters in her sister's life, such as her husband Stanley and his friends. The male dominance in the play is strongly influenced by the presence of Stanley Kowalski. The headstrong character is a modern man; he has a tight hold over his wife Stella. As he throws a package of meat for her to catch she is more than reluctant and delighted to catch which symbols her infatuation and his sexual dominance and power over her is obvious. Stanley shows animalistic characteristics in his animal-like behaviour that he produces, he eats like an animal at the table and refers to himself as a 'king' in his own home. Male dependency is a definitive key element during the 1960's where the story was written and women are seen to always depend on a man and in the case of Blanche 'the kindness of a stranger' which is her downfall as she relies on others to look after her. The attention and power Stanley has over the women in his life namely Stella and sometimes Blanche is a tragic element in the play as it is this power that he has which forces the truth from Blanche and in the end sends her into a downward spiral of insanity.

Another symbol to focus on is The Varsouviana. The Varsouviana polka tune plays in several scenes in the play; it is the polka tune that played when she shared the last dance with her late husband. The music normally plays when she is acting in a way that was affected by the death of her husband. It symbolizes her decline of mental health where she begins to reject reality and it has played during the first scene where Stanley asks about her husband and when she tells Mitch about him after which it appears more often throughout the play.

William's dramatizes the fantasy vs. reality aspect by the interior and exterior setting and its surrounding areas of Stanley and Stella's two-bedroom home. Other characters drop in and out with their problems like Blanche does, and will not keep her ideas and thoughts of the working class to herself. Her inability to face reality is challenged and Stanley continues to pressure her and watch her every move. Towards the end of the play where Stanley rapes Blanche, the back wall of the apartment becomes transparent and therefore shows the struggles in the street and foreshadows the tragedy that will befall Blanche.

Stanley and his friends enjoy regular poker games at each others houses. The poker game held at Stanley's symbolizes the way in which his life is going. The first game he loses which represents the hardships and events to come when Blanche arrives. But in the second game he wins and the cards deal him luck, "I believed I was lucky... To hold first position in this rat race you've got to believe you are lucky". This symbolizes his success and the exit of Blanche from his life, which is all he ever wanted from the beginning. There is a struggle over who can control Stella as they are both in a 'rat race' as they both try to influence her but Stanley wins out in the end.

The poker game is recognised as a game of bluff. Blanche is considered to be playing a game of bluff throughout the play as she's portrayed as a compulsive liar. The beginning of Blanche losing as she can no longer lie to save her life as this happens when she lies to Mitch continuously; "I don't think I want to marry you any more... You aren't clean enough". Again, Blanche's fantasy world comes into play and acts as a form of escapism to Blanche, possibly from her past. Hiding from her past is what Blanche has hoped to do when she moves to New Orleans in the hope of a new start, but the audience see her unable to do this. Blanche's fantasies are important as she may be recognised as a character who is trying to assert her control somewhere within a world from which she has no control. Williams shows Blanche's struggles with old and new and try to distance herself from her past to which she fails, and the audience feel sympathetic towards her character.

Blanche is not keen on glare of a "naked light". She fears that her looks are fading and she will not longer be beautiful and significant in the world. Her vanity shows through this and is always seeking the attention of men and explains to Stella that men: "don't even admit your existence unless they are making love to you." She craves the male attention and does not want to be alone in this day and age where she may no longer be able to use her looks to get what she wants. Williams has Blanche in a pitying position and the audience may feel either pity or nothing at all for this character of such vanity and promiscuous behaviour.

The paper lantern is a huge symbol in the play and is symbolic of Blanche's attempts at hiding her past under this 'lantern'. During the play, Mitch catches on that Blanche does not like to be under this light and always likes to be in 'dim lighting' he shoves the paper lantern in her face and asks of 'her real age'. You can't help but feel sorry for Blanche as the men in her life realize who and what she is and what her past entails. Williams uses these many symbols to represent the tragedy that befalls the protagonist. The paper lantern is also significant of the ending as Stanley rips the paper lantern off and ultimately was the one to reveal Blanche's past and send her off.

Alcohol plays a discreet role in the play. Both Stanley and Blanche drink excessively at various points during the play. Stanley's drinking is social: he drinks with his friends at the bar, at poker games, and to celebrate the birth of his child. Blanche's drinking, on the other hand, is seen as anti-social, and she tries to keep it a secret. She drinks on the sly in order to withdraw from harsh reality as alcohol can lead to stupid behaviour and Stanley, who is quick witted and smart realizes there's more to her than meets the eye. A state of drunken stupor enables her to take a flight of imagination, such as concocting a getaway with Shep Huntleigh. For both characters, drinking leads to destructive behaviour: Stanley commits domestic violence, and Blanche deludes herself. Yet Stanley is able to rebound from his drunken escapades, whereas alcohol augments Blanche's gradual departure from sanity.

The importance of symbolism throughout the play is significantly shown in the language and imagery shown throughout the text. It develops the play and its use of language has many hidden messages and sexual innuendos written behind it. The play follows many themes such as madness, fantasy and violence which would not be clearly illustrated if it were not for the use of symbols like the polka music and the paper lantern. The ending of the play was the result of Blanche's strange behaviour due to the many symbols that were highlighted throughout and have made the story and its plotline far more interesting once fully analyzed and understood.