

To What Extent are the visual and sound effects important in “A Streetcar Named Desire”?

Visual and sound effects are often as critical to the illustration of themes and ideas in a play as the characters themselves, due to the more nuanced ideas they represent. In “A Streetcar Named Desire”, visual and sound effects are important in the development of the themes of madness, desire and sex and death. They are also essential in the illustration of the motifs of light and bathing and the symbols of shadows and cries and the varsouviana polka. However, there are a number of other themes, motifs and symbols in the play that are entirely dependent on the actual journeys of the characters, and in no way developed by the visual and sound effects presented.

The visual aspect of “A Streetcar Named Desire” was clearly very important to the author; partly perhaps as a result of his interest in the cinema. His stage directions are very detailed, aiming to create an atmosphere that would heighten the impact of the action, though the visually recurring symbols Williams presents.

Firstly, throughout the play there is a continual reference to light. It is used in the form of bright sunlight, on the morning following Stella’s beating at the hands of Stanley, indicating that they have settled their grievances. It is used in the form of candlelight for the amorous isolation of Mitch and Blanche in scene six. But most important, it is used as a foil for Blanche. From the moment she viewed the death of her young husband, Blanche was aware that the bright searchlight of the world was extinguished and since that time, life to her has been nothing more than the flicker of a candle; and she intends to keep it that way, for she is prepared to protect herself from the harsh light of reality with the use of a paper lantern.

The paper lantern itself becomes a symbol of Blanche's longing for what she calls "magic" (scene 9), the dressing up of ugly reality. It is also linked with the image of a moth fatally attracted by light. She covers every bare light bulb for fear that her life of illusion will be discovered. Mitch finds the real Blanche by tearing the lantern from the light, and Stanley hands her the remains of her torn illusion in the very last moment of the play as she is being lead away to an asylum.

The spilt coke on Blanche's skirt is another symbol, recalling the blood spilt by her husband's suicide, as well as Blanche's ironically tainted reputation. Of course, her endless baths are an obvious symbol of her unspoken desire to be cleansed of her guilt for her husband's death and of her promiscuous past. Ritual cleansing has a long history, going back to Pontius Pilate who "took water and washed his hands" after the Jews had demanded the death of Jesus.

Also included in visual symbols are the primary colors of the men's shirts on poker night. The scene is compared to Van Gogh's painting of a billiard room, that places a very heavy emphasis on the primary colors of yellow and red. These "primary" colors could be interpreted as a visual representation of the men's seemingly "primitive" nature, as Blanche calls it.

Finally, the visual symbol of the moth is presented throughout "A Streetcar Named Desire" in reference to Blanche. This could be interpreted as Blanche being a moth that is fatally attracted to this distant illusion of a perfect life, filled with light, or hope. Alternatively, the moth could represent Blanche's own wishful view of herself, as an attractive being that men flock to, like moths to a light.

As well as visual effects, sound effects are also used. Foremost among them are the “blue piano”, representing the spirit of the rundown quarter, the polka for Blanche’s guilty memories of her husband, harsh discords for the rape and for Blanche’s removal to the mental hospital.

The sound effects such as the screech of a cat, or the inhuman voices heard in the climatic tenth scene all add to the chaotic atmosphere and tension arising, or possibly to enhance a feeling of one of the characters. The original script is unusual in that the author included a comprehensive sound effects plot, most notably sounds of passing trains which punctuate the action and heighten the sense of Blanche’s being left behind.

Also included in sound effects and symbols are the tamale and flower vendors presented throughout the play. In scene nine, we hear the vendor’s cry of the Mexican Woman, “flores, flores por los muertos” (flowers, flowers for the dead). It follows the moment when Mitch denounces Blanche as a liar and thereupon refuses to marry her. The vendor’s cry becomes symbolic of Blanche’s failure to remain among the living. Blanche protests by shouting “no, no! Not now! Not now!”, but the cry persists and in the following moment Blanche loses her hold on reality. Not so dramatically, the tamale vendor’s cries for “red hots” serves as a continual reminder of the sexual traces in the play as a whole.

The streetcar itself may be seen to represent a metaphor or subtext associated with the inevitability of Desire leading to sex and eventually death, in the same way that the streetcar named desire represents a sexual symbol in some dialogues, and takes Blanche to Elysian fields, a derivative of the Greek word “Elysium”, meaning Paradise.

The use of distorted shapes and jungle cries in the lines preceding Blanche's rape are further examples of such effective techniques. In this scene, these "lurid" and "grotesque" shadows could be seen as symbols of human cruelty, and of the raw animal desire Blanche and Stanley have for one another, despite their superficial mutual repulsion.

Tennessee Williams also uses music for the purpose of driving home a message. The "blue piano" is a symbol of the callous vitality of the Vieux Carré of New Orleans, while the Varsouviana polka represents the tragedy in Blanche's past. The significance of both musical themes is beyond providing a hint of locality—they mark a change of atmosphere, convey a menace, underline a tragic development. The "blue piano" in particular can signal a variety of messages, whereas the polka is specifically linked with the gunshot of the suicide of Blanche's husband and is heard by only her when she remembers him.

Music is also used to tie in with one of the main themes and to convey Blanche's mental state. Polka music, which was the music Blanche and her late husband danced to shortly before his suicide, is used to symbolize Blanche's mental state: only she can hear the music and ever time she recalls a disturbing memory, the music plays over in her mind. The blue piano is also used to symbolize the multi-cultural, busy, upbeat spirit of the run-down area within New Orleans.

Moreover, in scene seven, Blanche sings the popular ballad "Paper Moon" while she bathes. The song's lyrics describe the way love turns the world into a "phony" fantasy. The speaker in the song says that if both lovers believe their imagined reality, then it's no longer "make-believe". These lyrics sum up Blanche's approach to life. She believes that her fibbing is only a means of enjoying a better way of life and is therefore essentially harmless.

Blanche's singing in this scene acts as a contrapuntal to Stanley telling Stella the details of Blanche's sexually corrupt past. Williams ironically juxtaposes Blanche's fantastical understanding of herself with Stanley's description of Blanche's real nature. In reality, Blanche is a sham who feigns propriety and sexual modesty. Once Mitch learns the truth about Blanche, he can no longer believe in her tricks and lies.

However, although the themes, symbols and motifs presented by sound and visual effects are significant, there are several additional ideas that are not even touched on by these effects, including the motif of drunkenness, the symbol of meat and the themes of masculinity, marriage, society and class, sex, drugs and alcohol, appearances and morality, to name a few. Furthermore, although visual and sound effects highlight and symbolically represent some other themes and motifs, they do not construct the themes independently of the action and dialogue in the play. Therefore, I must conclude that visual and sound effects play an important, but limited role in the depiction of critical themes in the play, and are therefore central, but not the only constituent elements presented in "A Streetcar Named Desire".

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