

A Streetcar Named Desire - Motifs and symbols

Summary:

The article shows that there are a multitude of symbols in the play and this more expressionistic side to it is used to strong dramatic effect by Williams. One of the three main categories of symbol is light, which Blanche spends the whole play trying to avoid: it's the antidote to the fantasy world that she's content to stay in; standing in it would reveal her true nature. Colour also plays a role: for Stanley and Stella, the 'coloured lights' symbolise their sex life. Also, Stanley's bowling shirt and Blanche's white suit make them stand out in different ways, representing different elements of their character.

Sound is also key. The blue piano - representing New Orleans - is contrasted with the Varsouviana - representing Belle Reve. The music accompanies the descent away from peace, showing us the mental elements which can't easily be shown on stage. Finally, activities and pastimes hold significance. The poker night is presented as stereotypically masculine; the hostility that Stanley shows Stella and Blanche presents a stark divide between the men and women in this scene and the characters' attitudes. Blanche is often bathing, a passive activity; it makes her relaxed and reinvigorated, yet it's those moments where Stanley brings her world down, by telling Stella about her past.

Key points

- *Blanche is lost in a fantasy world.*

I think that this is undoubtedly true: she fakes various details to other people, such as her age with Mitch. However, this is more than just her being maliciously dishonest. At times when alone, she is heard talking to people who aren't there, like she thinks she's in another world. This leads me to believe that she's more than happy to alter details and create new ones in order to make sure she's living in the exact world that she wants to live in, whether or not this matches reality.

- *'The blue piano gives a somewhat melancholy atmosphere from the beginning of the play.'*

I disagree with this. As the play progresses, it's made clear that the blue piano is being used to symbolise sadness and loss, to signal when something bad is happening. However, the opening description paints a very romanticised picture: it 'expresses the spirit of the life that goes on here', it's played with 'infatuated fluency', the place as a whole has a 'raffish charm'. I don't think that this creates a melancholy atmosphere, but instead reinforces the description of 'raffish', i.e. that there's something strangely attractive about it despite it being a disreputable place. If it does create a melancholy atmosphere, then it doesn't from the start.

- *Stanley sees Blanche as a threat, particularly to his relationship with Stella, but the poker night is when that threat is realised.*

I agree with this point. When Stanley confided in Stella over his suspicions of Blanche, Stella was largely dismissive and even insulting - '...how stupid and horrible you're being.' From this, Stanley can see that he's beginning to lose his wife to his sister. When the poker night comes around, this continues: she repeatedly ignores him shouting at her and Blanche, something that he might see as a threat to him as he seems a very authoritative character. He then witnesses Mitch abandon the poker game - something we can tell is hugely important for him - to talk to Blanche. This is when we see him lose his temper, as he bellows his name before infamously throwing a radio out of the window and attacking Stella. The poker night is clearly the point at which he snaps; and as both Stella and Mitch flout Stanley's demands, leading to the outburst, it would be fair to suggest that Stanley is seeing this potential threat quickly come to reality.