
Table of Contents

BookRags Essay.................................................................................................................................1
Symbolism, imagery & allegory in Tennessee William's plays........................................1
Copyright Information.........................................................................................................................1


For the online version of Symbolism, imagery & allegory in Tennessee William's plays. Essay, including complete copyright information, please visit:


Copyright Information

©2000-2011 BookRags, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Dramatic Technique, Dramatic effect: Discuss the use of symbolism, imagery and allegorical figures in Tennessee William's plays

Williams once said, in the foreword to Camino Real, "a symbol in a play has only one legitimate purpose, which is to say a thing more directly and simply and beautifully than it could be said in words." Symbolism is used, along with imagery and allegory to that effect in both Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and A Streetcar Named Desire. Both plays tend to share the same kinds of symbols and motifs; sometimes they achieve the same meaning, sometimes not. It is possible that Williams' took elements from A Streetcar Named Desire to make Cat on a Hot Tin Roof a success. After the success of A Streetcar Named Desire, Williams' next 2 plays The Rose Tattoo and Camino Real didn't relive the success of their predecessor, therefore it is prudent to assume that Williams went back to his `winning formula'.

A prominent symbol in both plays is that of alcohol as an escape. In Cat on a Hot Tin Roof Brick's crutch is a symbol of his dependency on alcohol. Thomas Adler states, "The injured leg is clearly meant to symbolize a loss of power; without the crutch he is dependent on others ... [however, he] depends on a different kind of crutch, drink, to see him through." (Adler p.149-150). I agree with Griffin when she states "Brick drinks to escape a truth he cannot face, that he caused his friend Skipper's death" (Griffin p.153). Brick takes his physical and metaphorical crutch to defend himself from his past, while at the same time reliving an idealised version of that past.

Brick would rather lean on his `crutch' than on Maggie, this is expressed in the play's dialogue:

MARGARET: Lean on me.
BRICK: No, just give me my crutch.

MARGARET: Lean on my shoulder.

BRICK: I don't want to lean on your shoulder, I want my crutch! [Italics Williams']

(Cat. P.27)

This dialogue is symbolic of Brick's decision to take an ideal past over an uncertain future. The `click' in Brick's head is his escape; it echoes the click of the phone when he hung up on Skipper. It means that he doesn't have to face the truth anymore just like he didn't with Skipper. The alcohol leads to the click and the click leads to escape. At the end of the play, Maggie removes both of Brick's crutches until he satisfies her physically in trying for a baby. This is symbolically forcing Brick to face the future before wallowing in the past.

In A Streetcar Named Desire, one of the first things Blanche does when arriving at Elysian Fields is "look around for some liquor" (Streetcar p.120), just as she looks for an escape from her own past. This symbolism puts new meaning in Blanche's line "[looking down at the glass, which shakes in her hand]: You're all I've got in the world, and your not glad to see me!" it leaves one wondering whether she is talking to Stella or to the liquor at this point.

Both Brick and Blanche have idealised their pasts beyond reach. Brick sums this up, stating, "those high hurdles have gotten too high for me, now." (Cat p. 53) This imagery of the high hurdles is symbolic of the unattainable past Brick strives for. Boxhill believes that Brick saw Skipper as a symbol of a "marriage of pure souls" (Boxhill p.113). Griffin sums up Brick's past, stating, "His ideal marriage and his ideal friendship are both destroyed when Skipper breaks the rules with his drunken confession" (Griffin p.156). In contrast to his idealised version: "Brick conceives of his friendship with his dead friend as an idealistic ... relationship ... beyond the realm of price, of value ... He clings to this image as to a banner of purity to flaunt against
Blanche does this, but to an even further extent. Allan is the symbol of an idealised past to Blanche, however this image is betrayed by expressionist features such as the Varsounova which reminds Blanche and the audience of the darker side to her past.

Blanche lies to the other characters to create her ideal past, in her own words, she tells what "ought to be the truth" (Streetcar p.204). If Allan is the symbol of an ideal past then Shep Huntleigh is most definitely the symbol of her ideal future, a future where she can be appreciated for her "beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit" (Streetcar p. 211). Belle Reve, which means beautiful dream, is a strong symbol of Blanche's unattainable past. Eunice sums it up perfectly when she says, "A place like that must be awful hard to keep up". By these standards, the rest of Laurel represents Blanche's real past just as Shaw and Kiefaber symbolize that past catching up to her as they are the unseen figures who drag her past into her present.

It is also symbolic that Stella left Belle Reve for Stanley's new world, in other words she left Blanche's dream to face reality. Stella repeats this symbol at the end of the play when she chooses her future in Stanley's world at the expense of Blanche's. This struggle between old and new is echoed throughout the two plays.

Streetcar is a constant struggle between Blanche's old fashioned views and Stanley's new philosophy until the end when new triumphs over old: "Stanley represents the future: progress through hard work and single minded ambition. The Dubois way of life, the old southern aristocracy ... has ended." Stanley is allegorical of the `American Dream' at a workingman's level with his realist, hardworking persona and his new motto, "Every man is a king" (Streetcar p.195). Big Daddy is also allegorical of the `American Dream' at a higher level. He is also symbolic of the old world in contrast to the new world of `no-neck monsters'.

Big Daddy's cancer is a microcosm of the mendacity eating away at the Pollits. This could be Williams' way of commenting on how the old spirit of America is dying
through the mendacity spreading throughout it.

This way of thinking would certainly encapsulate the post-depression feeling of the time found in plays such as Miller's Death of a Salesman, which was written only 6 years earlier.

Brick is allegorical of truth and honesty, he and Big Daddy are, in Big Daddy's words "two people that never lied to each other" (Cat p.74). This is supported by the fact that Brick didn't buy Big Daddy a present and "don't want to fool him about it" (Cat p.28) while all the other characters are interested in is fooling Big Daddy in one way or another. " In fact the only lie that Brick corroborates he is coerced into making the truth by Maggie. Mitch is also allegorical of truth and honesty; this is exemplified when he admits to Blanche "I am ashamed of the way I perspire". This may be the reason people feel sympathy or empathy with these characters, their unconditional insistence on honesty.

Griffin states "Mae and Gooper personify the mendacity that disgusts Brick" (Griffin p.157), I tend to agree with this statement, I would also assert that Doc Baugh and Reverend Tooker symbolise how mendacity has spread throughout the community.

Blanche is allegorical of illusion whereas Stanley is allegorical of reality. "Stanley's animalistic and realistic approach to life contrasts with Blanche's genteel and illusionary way of life" (Li.On.). Blanche's illusion is obvious in her song (p.186-7). Ultimately Blanche's illusions of past, present and future are shattered by Stanley's harsh reality.

Cat contrasts "Big Daddy's and Brick's insistence on telling the truth with the deception practiced by the doctor, the preacher, Gooper and Mae, and even Maggie." (Griffin p.162). Honesty and deception play a big part in Big Daddy's favouring of Brick and, in the Broadway version, his unconceived child. Children are symbolic of the future in Cat, just as a child symbolizes where Stella's future lies in Streetcar. They are quite literally the future of Big Daddy's seed. Gooper's `no-neck monsters' are
externally greedy just as Gooper is internally greedy. Big Daddy doesn't want a future built on greed and mendacity. This he hints at in Act 3 saying, "A vacuum is a hell of a lot better than some of the stuff nature replaces it with". He wants a future based on truth and honesty, which is allegorical in Brick and any offspring he may have.

Doors are a recurring symbol in both texts. In both plays open doors represent a vulnerability to whatever lies behind them, whether it be the outside world or a person. In Act 1 of Cat, Maggie "...slams and locks [the] door fiercely.." (Cat p.31) in an attempt to momentarily seclude her and Brick from the rest of the family. Big Mama hates locked doors since she likes to know everything, Williams uses this ironically since she ultimately knows the least. The characters in Cat can hide behind doors to defend their own vulnerability to each other, however in Streetcar, Blanche has no door, physical or metaphorical to protect herself from Stanley. She admits this vulnerability in Scene 4: "But how could I stay here with him, after last night, with just those curtains between us"" (Streetcar p.161).

The colour white seems to represent purity in both plays. Blanche wears white clothing to create an "appearance of youthful, virginal purity. Her name ... translates to `White Wood'. She is not pure, but her clothing radiates innocence." (Li.On.) In other words, Blanche wears white to give an illusion of purity to hide her past debaucheries, whereas Brick's white clothing could represent both sexual purity and his longing for a `marriage of pure souls'.

Belle Reve's white columns are symbolic of Blanche's `pure dream'; the irony lies in the fact that it was gradually lost through the desire of her family's "epic fornications" (Streetcar p.140). One of our first images of Stella is of her with something spilt on her white lace collar (p.122). This may be symbolic of Stella's sexual maturity or perhaps her sexual dependence on Stanley. When Blanche stains her white skirt she gives "a piercing cry" (Streetcar p.170), this is symbolic of Blanche's own tainted purity, the reaction being one of fear and revulsion of the symbolic reminder of her real past. Later on Blanche dreams of a pure death, buried in a "clean white sack" (Streetcar p.220). This is because her past has been tainted by desire, her present and
future tainted by her past, now the only purity she has to look forward to is in death.

In Cat, Big Daddy describes the human animal as a `selfish beast'. This is reflected in Streetcar's men. This is reflected in their self-interest, Stanley's with his lack of compassion over the loss of Belle Reve: "Sister Blanche cannot be annoyed with business details right now!" (Streetcar p.132), Mitch's when he wants "what I been missing all summer" (Streetcar p.207).

Stanley is described in animal terms quite deliberately throughout the play. The first time we see him in Streetcar he is reminiscent of an animal bearing food after a kill in the jungle. We get a description of his animal sexuality in Scene 1: "Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the centre of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens ... his emblem of the gaudy seed bearer" [italics Williams'] Streetcar p.128)

At one point, Blanche tries to both literally and metaphorically tame the male beast by taking his masculine air away: "[She sprays herself with the atomizer; then playfully sprays him with it. He seizes the atomizer and slams it down on the dresser...]" Her attempt to take his masculinity away literally by spraying him with women's perfume and metaphorically by trying to weaken him with her flirting fails since he is not interested in her illusion.

To conclude, Williams uses the same kind of symbols, imagery and allegorical figures in both plays to force home the themes inherent in both plays in a more sophisticated and elegant form than conventional realist drama can offer.

Word Count - 2062

Bibliography
Griffin, A. Understanding Tennessee Williams, Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1995


Williams, T., Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and other plays, ed. E. Martin Browne, London, Penguin, 1976

Internet references

`A Streetcar Named Desire', Literature Online, 10th December 2001,