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True Colors

Nearly every color is associated with emotion and feeling. Red is anger and passion, blue is serenity and sadness, green is life and envy. These relations are so ingrained in the human mind that connections are often made subconsciously. Tennessee Williams uses this phenomenon to his advantage when incorporating symbolism into *A Street Car Named Desire*. Colors, most commonly used for description and imagery, take on a greater role in this play, where they convey the ambitions and personalities of the characters, as well as the atmosphere of the setting.

Colors are used differently depending on the characters and their personas. Stanley Kowalski, Stella’s brutish and blunt husband, is often associated with vibrant, deep pigments. He and his similarly brash friends gather to play poker wearing “colored shirts, solid blues, a purple, a red-and-white check, a light green” (Williams 45). These colors further express the strength and vivacity of their characters. They carry an air of life and excitement, as well as directness and determination. This not only depicts their personalities, but the overall energy of the lower class at the time. While the upper class and Southern nobility was beginning to die out, the lower class and new money was surging to power and importance. The vividness surrounding these men reinforces this idea of the new life surrounding the working class. However, these colors also suggest brutality and violence. Stanley is first introduced wearing “blue red denim work clothes” and carrying “a red-stained package from the butcher’s”, initially connecting the image of blood with Stanley (Williams 13). This descriptive use of color can be immediately linked to cruelty and violence, which foreshadows his eventual animal-like nature and rape of Blanche, and also conveys the stereotypical view of the working class at the time the play was written.

While Stanley’s colors are direct and straightforward, Blanche’s colors often contradict her true nature. When she arrives to live with Stella and Stanley, she is “dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat” (Williams 15). Dressed head to toe in white, she initially presents herself with an atmosphere of innocence and purity. Her name, Blanche Dubois, translates to “white woods” in French. Everything about her outward appearance is used to deceive those around her and hide her true personality and past. In reality, she uses her sex appeal to get what she wants, worked as a prostitute, and had a relationship with an underage boy. The only time she strays from her façade is when talking to Mitch, a potential love interest. When they begin to discuss love and romance, she “slipped on the dark red satin wrapper”. With the color red, often meaning romance and passion, she reveals her true nature, which is one of seduction. She uses it to obtain power of Mitch, who has the ability to provide her with marriage and a stable life, something she desperately craves. Her use of color mirrors the struggle of the Southern nobility to survive. While it appeared pristine on the surface, it was wracked with conflict and scandal at its foundations, causing it to crumble, as Blanche ultimately did.

Color has an influence on the setting as well as the characters. At numerous times throughout the play, blue piano music is heard around the apartment and Stanley. The bright and vivid color blue suggests liveliness and health. When it is connected to Stanley, who embodies the working class, it can be interpreted that they will overcome the upper class that once ruled over them. Color is also used to foreshadow. After Stella and Blanche are talking prior to the poker night, “Red hot!” is heard on the street (Williams 44). The color red not only reinforces the vibrancy of New Orleans, but also foreshadows the rising conflict and overflow of passion between Stella and Stanley that will arise in the next scene. Finally, the color yellow that surrounds Blanche in the setting symbolizes decay and death. When Stanley examines her papers he finds “love letters, yellowing with antiquity, all from one boy” (Williams 41). The boy is Blanche’s ex-husband, who died along with Blanche’s hopes of love. Yellow light exposes Blanche’s true age in her appearance, signifying the decline of Blanche, as well as the fall of the traditional upper class.

Throughout *A Street Car Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams interlaces colors and the symbolic meaning they hold to convey the motivations and traits of the characters, and the nature of the setting. The end result is a development of synesthesia in the mind of the reader regarding both the characters and location. While the pages may be printed in black and white, a rainbow lies within the words.