

Impact of Lighting and Symbolism to a Play

In Drama, the meaning of a symbol goes beyond its surface meaning as a literary device that connects real-life people to their own existence, and particular objects, places or occurrences. Dramatic symbols, for example, characters, settings, objects, actions, situations and statements can be cultural. Cultural symbols such as crosses, flags, snakes and flowers are understood by the audience regardless of the appearance of their context.

Stage directions are the playwright's instructions about facial and vocal expression, movement and action, gesture and "body language," stage appearance, lighting and similar matters. In ancient times, plays were performed in the daylight. There was no use for artificial illumination. When indoor theaters and evening performances came along, lighting became a necessity. Artificial lighting such as lanterns, candelabras, sconces, torches and indirect lighting were used through reflectors and valances. Later, gaslight and limelight lamps replaced open flames. Electric lights in the nineteenth century were enhanced virtually by technical features of our electronic age. This type of lighting included specialized lamps, color filters, spotlights, dimmers and simulated fires. Lighting was used to highlight an individual's character, to isolate and emphasize various parts of the stage, to establish times, and to share the moods of the individual scenes. Lighting also divided the stage or the unit set into different acting areas where the illumination of one section could take place and the rest was darkened.

In Langston Hughes' "Mulatto", the setting is based in a rich looking Big House on a Plantation in Georgia characterized as "walnut style of the nineties". (Mul.1.1611). The living

room scene exhibits a hallway “leading to the porch.” (Mul.1.1610). This use of symbolism establishes the rights and privileges of Whites on the Plantation and the African Americans who worked there. This play is also an allegory as its symbols refer to general human experiences.

The settings also establish a lighting of the time of the day, whether it is afternoon or evening. Act 1 states the setting as “The windows are raised. The afternoon sunlight streams in.” (Mul.1.1611). This time of day is late afternoon. Act 2 states the setting as “shadows of the window curtains have lengthened on the carpet.” “The sunshine has deepened to a pale orange, and the light paths grow less distinct across the floor.” (Mul.2.1.1623). This time of day is in the evening when the Sun is going down.

In Hughes’ “Mulatto,” the story involves a rich White man, Colonel Thomas Norwood, living on a Plantation farm in Georgia and at that time, Whites were dominant over the Blacks. He lives with a Black woman, Cora, who is like his wife. Colonel Norwood is the father of all of Cora’s children, who believes he treats them well as he sends them off to school to learn and allows them to live in his house. The characters use the words light, dark and in-between. Light to mean light-skinned or “White”, dark meaning “Black” or Negro, and in-between meaning “Half- White” and “Half-Black.” They use these words to illustrate the fact that the children and Cora are Black, and the Colonel is White and is the father of the children in his household.

The play evolves around a simple family but because Cora is Black and Blacks are like slaves and dominated by the White race, Colonel Norwood does not accept the children as his, only Cora’s. The play’s main focus, though, is on Robert, one of the Colonel’s sons, who is sent off to school for five years and returns, and comes to realize that he is the son of a rich White man and does not consider himself a Black working in the fields. Robert was able to escape his bounds for awhile and see life in a different prospective and not like Black people would in that

time that were uneducated and only worked in the fields. Robert is the type of man who is tired of being treated like an outcast when he is the son of Colonel Norwood and is not going to be like any other Black. He does not like his father. He is going to walk in the front door even though only the White people walk through the front and the Black walk in through the back. Robert is telling all of the town folk and his other brother, William, that he will be inheriting the Plantation someday when the Colonel dies because he is his son, and he should be considered White when he is not. For example, in Act 2, Scene 1, Norwood is having an argument with Robert where the Colonel is telling Robert that he must not talk and act like he is White when he is Black and should act accordingly. Robert states, "Oh! But I'm not a nigger, Colonel Tom, I'm your son. Norwood replies, "You're Cora's boy." Robert goes on to say, "Women don't have children by themselves," and Norwood states, "Nigger women don't know the fathers. You're a bastard." (Mul. 2.1.20-23). As the play goes on to continue with the argument, Robert's father points a gun at Robert. Robert then kills his father by choking him. Robert leaves his father lying on the floor, takes his gun, and heads for the front door, and tells his mother, Cora, that he will return. The lighting used in this Act and scene reflect this tragedy. For instance, after Robert kills his father and heads for the front door and opens it, the scene depicts, "The sunset streams in like a river of blood." (Mul. 2.1.56).

A mob of white men go after Robert with their hound dogs only to chase him back to his house. He then returns like he said he was going to. Cora states that she has been waiting for him and has a hiding room upstairs for him. Robert states to Cora, "No time to hide, ma. They're at the door now. They'll be coming up the back way, too. They'll be coming in the windows. They'll be coming in everywhere. And only one bullet left, ma. It's for me."

(Mul. 2.2.48-50). He then proceeds upstairs and the audience hears a single shot. The play ends in another tragedy as Robert kills himself.

This play is very sentimental and emotional in that it characterizes the way life is for African-Americans and the way they were treated in those days. A lesson it does teach is one can be closed minded in the surroundings of their lives, and once separated from their surroundings, can change their view of life.

Works Cited

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