

“Visual action can be as important on the stage as speech,” How far do you agree with this claim? In your answer you should refer to two or three plays you have studied.

Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* both utilise visual action as well as speech in order to convey each playwright's views and messages across to the audience; each method is used separately, together, contrasted, or ignored in order to achieve the effect on the audience that will best express their attitudes on the issues which they consider important.

Speech clearly has a crucial function in both plays; it is how each character communicates their ideas, and thus, how each playwright expresses their perspective on the issues. From the very opening of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, it becomes apparent that dialogue will play a significant role in the play. Blanche's instructions to take a streetcar named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at Elysian Fields, is extremely important and this is indicated by the use of the title of the play in the dialogue. Through this speech, Williams wishes to reveal how desire can be a destructive influence, as it leads to *Cemeteries*. This helps to foreshadow how Blanche's desire for a man will eventually destroy her and drive her insane. Moreover, the fact that she wants to arrive at *Elysian Fields*, creates connotations of heaven as this name is a part of Greek mythology that suggests paradise. Thus, the audience understands how Blanche is living in an illusory dream that she has constructed in order to escape the harsh reality of life and this is clearly indicated by her next line, *They mustn't have understood what number I wanted...*, as the use of the hyphens in the sentence and the ellipses at the end of her line reveals how she is unable to comprehend that her sister is not living the rich and fabulous life she had dreamt.

Speech is also equally important in *The Crucible*. The end of Act One is filled with *acstatic cries* of accusations from the girls, *I saw Goody Osburn with the Devil!*, *I saw Goody Hawkins with the Devil!*, and through this, Miller is able to recreate the hysteria and panic that filled not only the society in Salem, but also his own 1950s society. Miller does this as he wishes to use it later on to reveal to the audience how this hysteria had impaired the judgements of even sound minded individuals in society such as Danforth to such an extent that he was forced to condemn to death even the most infallible characters in the play such as Rebecca Nurse. Furthermore, it is revealed later on how Abigail's accusations are simply a *whore's* revenge, and this reveals that Abigail was simply using this as an opportunity to take revenge. However, from a feminist perspective, it could be interpreted that Abigail behaved the way she did because the patriarchal society under which she was living did not provide her any other avenue to gain power and thus, the audience could view Abigail sympathetically. However, this is not the effect that Miller intended the audience to have. Miller wanted to draw a clear parallel between the panic of the Salem Witch Hunts to the panic of the Communist Witch Hunts of his own time as he believed that people were simply using Communism as a cover to take revenge upon other people in society; in his view, the Communist Witch Hunts of Senator McCarthy were just as unfounded and baseless as the Salem Witch Hunts. Thus, this hysteria created by the speech of Abigail and Betty at the end of Act One helps to not only demonstrate this important message to the audience, but it also explains why Miller constantly tries to undermine Abigail's character. By undermining Abigail, he is able to undermine the Salem Witch Hunts, and consequently, the Communist Witch Hunts as well. Hence, it is evident that without speech, the playwrights would be unable to express these key ideas across to the audience in such an effective manner.

However, visual action can be considered as more important than speech as the body language and actions of the characters have a key role in drama as they can convey messages that no speech could ever do. The way in which Mitch *leaves the package* of meat at Stella at the very opening of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is reflective of the vibrancy, vitality, and vivacity of the working class society in which Stella finds herself in. It is this primitiveness that has broken down the barriers and provided a greater freedom to Stella as she is no longer constricted by the values that used to be imposed upon her by the aristocratic she used to live in. Moreover, the fact that Stanley is throwing meat at Stella has some sexual connotations and this is intended to reflect the passion that has brought Stella and Stanley together in the first place, and it foreshadows how passion will keep them, and others in this society, together throughout the rest of the play. Furthermore, as Stanley is presented to the audience as *leaving* meat, it indicates the animalistic nature of this society and this is used to foreshadow the possibility that violence has a key component in this play. Thus, this single visual action of Stanley has introduced to the audience a number of the key themes that Williams wishes to portray.

The importance of visual action is also highlighted by Miller in *The Crucible* as it is used to convey a key message. In Act Two, we find Cheever enter Proctor's house and find a *poppet* and in *the belly of the poppet*, he finds that *a needle* is stuck. The significance of this visual act is very important. Miller wishes to use the poppet to represent the society in Salem as well as the modern society. A poppet is vulnerable to outside influences which can corrupt it, similar to how Salem was corrupted by their false belief in witches and how the American society of the 1950s had a false fear of Communism which had created paranoia. The *needle* which was *stuck* in the poppet is

intended to symbolise how people in society were using the Witch Hunt as a means of taking revenge upon others and similarly, how people in modern society were using Communism as cover to take revenge. Thus, through this visual action of Mary inserting a needle into the poppet, Miller wishes to educate people in society about how their fear in Communism is unfounded. Moreover, in terms of character development, the fact that Abigail has orchestrated this whole event vilifies her in the eyes of the audience. Hence, through this visual action, Miller has managed to present the audience with a number of differing ideas and themes.

It is also important to realise that both playwrights place equal importance on visual actions and speech to emphasise a particular message. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stanley's reactions, both visual and speech wise, to Stella's order to go and wash up, are extremely revealing. Stanley's first reaction is to hurl a plate to the floor and this shows how Stanley's first response to always resort to violence. Thus, it reveals the part of the working class society that Williams was against: the violence. This is what Williams feels undermines this type of society and this leaves the audience questioning which character they should support as Williams had already shown the downside of Blanche's aristocratic society as well he considered it to be too constrictive. This ambivalent feeling that Williams leaves the audience with is intended to reflect what was happening in society; there was a struggle between the aristocratic and working class society for power. Stanley's speech, following this action is also pertinent, 'Every Man is a King! And I am the king around here', as this reveals the patriarchal nature of the working class society. Women have no voice to express themselves and this explains why Stanley responds so harshly to Stella's order to help me clear the table; he expects her to be submissive and listen to what he says. Thus, from a feminist perspective, it can be seen how escaping this society was impossible and it also foreshadows how Blanche's desire would also inevitably fail and lead to her downfall as her quest for dominance over Stanley would also fail. To emphasise his speech and previous visual action, Stanley then goes on to hurl a cup and saucer to the floor, and this accentuates just how much power he possesses in this society. As a result, by combining visual action and speech so effectively, Williams manages to thoroughly convince the audience of this aspect of his message.

Similarly, Miller also combines these two methods of communication effectively to convey his message. John Proctor's action in the last act of tearing the paper [his confession] and crumpling it is symbolic of his challenge to authority. Miller wants to present Proctor as a hero to the audience as he is standing up for his own morals and values in the face of society and the fact that Proctor has sinned in the past also shows how he is a normal man. Thus, Miller wants to express the message that anyone is capable of being a hero by simply standing up for what they believe in. This value that Proctor believes is his name, and he demands for them to leave me my [his] name as he has already given you my [his] soul and he questions, how may I live without my name? This speech is not only significant in revealing his morals, but it also goes hand in hand with the tearing of the confession as it is this incident which shows him that he is worth dying. He had initially considered himself to be unworthy of being considered a martyr as he had sinned in the past. However, the fact that he was unwilling to take the final step to admitting that he was a witch showed Proctor that he was worthy dying as he was too moral to confess to a lie. As a result, Proctor can be seen as a heroic character as he is standing up to his values. This is important to Miller as he considered himself to be a hero during the Communist Witch Hunts for refusing to give the names of anyone who attended Communist meetings. Consequently, this combination of visual action and speech used by Miller to depict Proctor is extremely significant as it is used to reveal key ideas and beliefs that he truly believes in.

However, there are times when both playwrights contrast the message of the visual action and the message of the speech to achieve a particular dramatic purpose. Blanche's behaviour to Mitch in *A Streetcar Named Desire* demonstrates just this. Blanche explains to Mitch that I guess it just that I have old-fashioned ideals! Blanche uses this to explain to Mitch why she asked him to unhand her by removing his hands from her waists. Mitch clearly believes in this and feels that he has stepped out of bounds. However, following this speech by Blanche, the stage directions reveals that she rolls her eyes, knowing he cannot see her face, and this use of dramatic irony by Williams is meant to indicate how Blanche is falsely pretending to be interested in these old-fashioned ideals when she has in fact had sexual relationships with many men in the past. As a result, the audience feels very sympathetic to Mitch as they realise that he is being deceived and they also begin to perceive Blanche in a far more antagonistic manner. Thus, Williams successfully contrasts visual action with speech to shift the audience's sympathy and support whilst also developing the character of Blanche by showing how she was willing to do anything to gain the protection and support of a man.

Miller also contrasts visual actions and speech to suit his own purpose. During Act Two, when Herrick comes to arrest Elizabeth, the visual actions and speech of Hale appear to be contradictory. When he speaks, he tries to reassure Proctor that the court is just and fair, but his own visual actions reveal that he is full of a fever of guilt and uncertainty which highlights the difference between what he says and how he appears to the audience. Through this, Miller wants to show how ambivalent Hale is feeling about what he has done. Hale is intended to be the character in the play that the audience can follow and replicate in real life, and his great uncertainty is meant to

show how the audience should also be questioning what is happening around them during the Communist Witch Hunt. Moreover, the fact that Hale questions the fairness of the court undermines the Salem Witch Hunts and also the Communist Witch Hunts. It also undermines the very foundations of this society as this is a theocratic society, one in which religion is a key factor in the judicial process, and Miller believes this impairs the judgements of many individuals. Miller wants to make the audience realise that 1950s America is also facing a similar situation as the fear of Communism is impairing the judgements of individuals and that the audience should take action to rectify this problem. Thus, it is clear that both playwrights sometimes contrast visual action and speech to create a particular effect in the audience.

It is also important for one to realise that playwrights sometimes choose to not utilise either visual action or speech in some scenes. Williams chooses not to depict the rape of Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, partly due to censorship reasons, but mainly because the whole play has been building up to that point and both Blanche and Stella have had this date with each other from the beginning. Williams's decision not to show it adds to the dramatic and violent nature of the rape which is intended to make the audience realise how society would become if the aristocratic society was defeated. The rape is also intended to reflect the extinction of the morals and values that Blanche represents. Thus, by choosing not to use visual action or speech to depict the rape, Williams not only manages to emphasise the death of the sophisticated values of the aristocratic society but he also reveals, through the fact that men such as Stanley go unpunished for these violent actions, how the working class society is also flawed and that the audience may be better off in believing the fantasies and dreams of Blanche rather than the violent and harsh reality.

Similarly, Miller chooses not to use visual action or speech to reveal the hanging of Proctor, as this makes the hanging far more dramatic. Moreover, the hanging of Proctor is also used to reveal how society is about to change as a new sun is pouring in and this suggests that there will be freedom, hope, and change. Hale believes that the hanging was his fault and that he had needed to correct it; he felt that his death was meaningless and that it is vanity. However, this view is incorrect. Proctor has managed to reach salvation by refusing to commit a sin by lying; this is ironic as he needed to lie to save himself from dying in the first place, so, Hale has accidentally provided Proctor his salvation and made him feel that he is worthy enough to hang. As the rape and the hanging are probably the two most important events in the plays, and as neither visual action nor speech plays a role, it clearly reveals how Miller and Williams always try to use what is most appropriate to create the effect they want; they do not believe that either visual action or speech is superior.

To conclude, both Miller and Williams try to use visual action and speech in a particular manner to achieve the effect they believe is necessary to communicate their message across to the audience. The two playwrights are fundamentally different. Miller uses realism in order to show the paranoia of the society in Salem as well as the 1950s society he lived in as he believed that the Communist Witch Hunt was simply used as an excuse by many people to take revenge upon their enemies whilst hiding under the guise of Communism. Thus, the visual actions historically accurate and realistic whilst the speech reflects the Salem dialect of the 1690s, for example, *Goody Proctor*. On the other hand, Williams uses the expressionist form of theatre in order to evoke emotions rather than present things as they really are because he wishes to blur the line between fantasy and reality and reveal that if Stanley's society wins this class struggle, this more creative type of theatre, like the sophistication of Blanche, may be lost. Consequently, the speech used includes exaggerated emotions such as *luxurious sobbing* and *sensual murmur* as well as visual actions such as *smashes a bottle* to evoke the emotions of the audience. In the end, neither playwright places greater importance on either visual action or speech but they use them to convey the messages of each playwright so effectively and strikingly that it leaves each member of the audience's mind and body *rattle like bones in the morning air*.