

THE GLASS MENAGERIE AS A MEMORY PLAY: AN ANALYSIS OF ILLUSION AND REALITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie as a 'memory play,' a term the playwright himself is credited with coining. The analysis delves into how memory shapes the structure, themes, and characterization of the play. Drawing connections between personal and universal memory, the paper examines how Williams reconstructs his past through his protagonist Tom, portraying the fragility of dreams and the inescapable pull of nostalgia. Using literary and critical perspectives, this study highlights the interplay between illusion and reality in the play, situating it within the broader tradition of memory in literature and theatre.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Escape, Fragility, Symbolism, Isolation, Reminiscence, Guilt, Longing.

Introduction

The Glass Menagerie, as the title suggests, deals with a subject that is fragile, see through or 'glassy' and preserved, but shoved back to a corner almost like a 'memory'. Tennessee Williams, an American playwright, is credited with the coining of the term 'memory play'. He draws a tale of a family struggling during the Great Depression, living in a cramped apartment fostering hopes and illusions to make an escape one day. However, they end up getting caged by their dreams and memories. As Maiti rightly infers, "The Glass Menagerie complements the poet's lifelong perception of and fascination with illusion and reality and shows William's notion on the subjectivity of memory. In the post World War II backdrop of trauma... memory became an important theme in theatre as well as in other arts". Be that as it may, he was not the first to have incorporated this idea in his work. Greek dramas made use of 'anagnorsis' that Favorini defines as an "existential repositioning of an individual vis-a-vis the past"; epics like The Iliad and The Mahabharata were first orally transmitted records of memory and Shakespearean plays like Hamlet explored the theme of memory way before Tennessee Williams did. Nevertheless, he attempted to refashion this trend by expanding the emphasis from a mere reminiscence to a 'reconstruction of memories'. This essay is therefore an attempt at viewing and thereby, analysing the play as a 'memory play'.

Fyodor Dostoevsky once stated, "At first, art imitates life. Then life will imitate art. Then life will find its very existence from the arts." This resonates very closely with this play and the playwright since, the play is first drawn from Williams' memory and then from Tom's. Many critics also believe that this is Williams' most 'autobiographical play'. Perhaps, Williams forges this play to come to terms with his distressful youth and to cope with his "shattered consciousness" as Jackson likes to put it. He (Williams) too once asserted, "If the writing is honest it cannot be separated from the man who wrote it" (Haley, 1999). There are explicit similarities, be it the common initials of the playwright's and narrator's names or the similar characteristics of their family members. Both lived in St. Louis and worked in a shoe factory before becoming writers. Secondly, they were also emotionally neglected by their fathers. Amanda too is an echo of playwright's mother, Edwina, who ended up marrying the wrong man and liked to recall her

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glorious days as a 'southern belle'. Even Laura is a reflection of Williams' sister Rose who could not deal with the work pressure and criticism. She was later admitted to an asylum as a mental patient and got a lobotomy done, which did not heal her, to say the least. The greatest similarity is perhaps, that both William and Tom are burdened by the guilt of abandoning their helpless sisters. This transformation from personal to universal is one of the many 'truths' presented in the 'disguise of illusion', here the truth is Williams' past and the guise is that of the play. Jacob aptly says that "fiction is at heart an emotional autobiography". And perhaps it is because Williams finds his echo in Tom, he makes him the narrator of 'their' memories.

The play is then looked upon from only Tom's perspective. He states, "I have tricks in my pocket... I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion". This is perhaps a disclaimer that the play is a disguised truth with Tom as the only character, considering that others are merely the shards of his fragmented memory. In this capacity the play is similar to 'meta theatre', as Maiti states, "It thus more resembles the cinematic technique of the camera choosing the viewer's viewpoint". We are further told that memory "takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated". Another critic Schlib analyses the statement—"Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic". Here, the phrase 'dimly lighted' denotes that Tom's memory is cloudy and therefore unreliable. For instance, the instant when he admits that he cannot clearly recall the colour of Laura's dress or when he talks about conversations, he was not privy to. Crandell talks about these "imperfections" and discusses Tom's description of scene six, which takes place when he should have been at work. Here, memory does not just work as a theme but as a foundation, wherein the unreliability of the recaller shapes the play and its characters.

Moreover, since memories do not come to haunt people in an order, the play too oscillates between present and past. In scene one, for instance, after delivering the monologue in the present, Tom moves to the past and joins his family at the dining table. Moreover, this constant oscillation allows the playwright to portray delusional characters whose preoccupation with the past troubles their present; be it Amanda's constant nostalgia, Tom's desire for a future or Laura's hopeless present. Similarly, Sam Bluefarb notes, "the past not only casts its shadow upon the present and the future, but actually determines the course that each of these shall take. Thus, the present and, by implication, the future are prevented from taking a course." Also, since they fail to accept the bleak reality of the world around them, they try to create a 'utopia' with their delusions, dreams, and favoured memories. Bigsby states that, "memory has become a myth, a story to be endlessly repeated as a protection against present decline".

Other than the liberty with the time frame, the atmosphere wherein the play takes place is also 'memory-like'. Williams' careful use of music, lighting and the screen device activate and clarify the incidents from memory. Music for one, as Williams states, "gives emotional emphasis - it is the lightest, most delicate music in the world and perhaps the saddest". Its tone and rhythm both match the content of the memory that is shared with the audience and set the mood for them. For instance, Williams juxtaposes the title song "The Glass Menagerie" with the fragile and beautiful memories that people like to cherish. Also, it keeps changing with a change in mood or tone. Moreover, we also witness Tom saying, "In memory, everything seems to happen to music... That explains the fiddle in the wings". He is perhaps talking of the rhythmic oscillation between fond memories and bitter realities. John Chapman similarly notes that "Paul Bowles' music helps to break one spell or weave another, as need be".

Likewise, lighting helps the audience by guiding the emphasis on certain objects and characters. For instance, during the quarrel between Tom and Amanda spotlight remains on Laura. Williams directs the play this way to portray Laura in the 'pristine clarity' like 'religious saints and Madonnas'. Williams also says, "The dim lighting was a product of Tom's mind and how dreamy it truly was." The light, therefore, remains dim throughout the play to suggest the hazy nature of memory and creates an unreal environment.

Lastly, the screen aids in creating a divide between illusion and reality. Adler suggests, "the screen device might also function as to replicate how memory works by association as well as to diminish any excessively sentimental response in the manner of a Brechtian distancing device". It also provides further insight into the important sections of the play. As Williams states, "the legend or image upon the screen will strengthen the effect of what is merely allusion in the writing and allow the primary point to be made more simply and lightly than if the entire responsibility were on the spoken lines". For instance, in scene one, the legend, "Où sont les neiges d'antan?" appears and introduces the audience to Amanda's fondest memories and therefore, to her rose-tinted view. Similarly, the image of blue roses is a significant clue to Laura's memories.

Be that as it may, the play is designed like the shards of a broken glass put together. We are presented with multiple fragments of memories that are bound together by Tom's. In the initial scene, we are given a very bleak and dark description- "dark narrow alleyways, tangled clotheslines, sinister latticework, and dark tenement" and perhaps, this description symbolically describes Tom's state of mind. It is his mind that preserves the memories of his family to be used both as a constant reminder and defence mechanism. First, the memories provide an excuse for his abandonment. Secondly, it allows him to recall his sister, paradoxically to "keep alive in the present what is dead and gone forever" (Jacobs, 2002). They also allow him to transform them into a story to exorcise the ghost of his guilt. It is also this constant oscillation between his past and the present that makes him go to the movies, expressing his wish for an escape from the stubborn cycle of his past. However, it is tragically revealed to us that an actual escape was never possible for him and the more he tries, the more he is caged.

It should also be noted that flashbacks are often a result of unfulfilled dreams. This is especially true for Amanda, who lives in a constant nostalgia for the life in the 'Blue Mountain'. It provides her a temporary respite, much like Scarlett O'Hara from *Gone with the Wind*. Her flashbacks often blur the lines between her memory and dreams; she yearns to live in the past when she was well-off and drew male attention. This is apparent from the lines, "One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain - your mother received seventeen! gentlemen callers! Why, sometimes there weren't chairs enough to accommodate them all. Well in the South we had so many servants. Gone, gone, gone. All Vestige of gracious living". These dreams not only remind her of her husband but also restrict her children. She imposes them on Amanda when she wishes for her to get married because "girls that aren't cut out for business careers usually wind up married to some nice man". She also controls Tom because she fears that he would become his father. Furthermore, she thinks: 'I am what I was'. She cannot accept the reality and cannot be anything other than the pampered belle she was brought up to be. Therefore, her illusions are more pitiable than her children's and as things go south, she clings more desperately to her memories. When Jim arrives, she tries to recreate the past and wistfully distorts the reality in the process by adorning a frilled dress and employing a Southern accent. Bigsby remarks that for her, "memory has become a myth, a story to be endlessly repeated as a protection against present decline. She wants nothing more than to freeze time".

A similar sense of futility and fragility is evoked by Laura's glass menagerie. It is see-through, thus, symbolic of memory's capacity to bridge the gap between past and present. Perhaps therefore critics also find it to be representative of Laura's infancy. However, Laura's memories are not as intense as her mother's. She comes to share her memory of Jim and the 'blue roses' much later in the play, and perhaps just once. Be that as it may, when she talks of her fondest memories of Jim, she ends up creating another illusion, one that breaks right after it comes true in the form of a kiss. Her nostalgia shatters just like her glass unicorn, which she then presents as a 'souvenir' to Jim. 'Souvenirs' are supposed to be timeless and memorable but they are nonetheless always shoved back in a corner, a fate that both Laura and her unicorn suffer.

Mr. Wingfield's omnipresent photograph is another constant reminder of the past, hope and ironically pain for the Wingfield family. It occupies a significant space in Tom's memory and is therefore described as such. He too wishes for an adventurous life like the one his father is living. Laura, however, probably wishes for him to return and the music he has left is "a painful reminder of him". The bathrobe, one that Amanda adorns is another "relic of the faithless Mr. Wingfield". She frequently stops by the photograph, perhaps in an attempt to re-experience his charm. To this Nancy Tischler argues, "Not having seen her husband growing old and ugly enable(d) her to preserve her romantic image of him".

Jim, the last character to make an appearance, does not dwell in his past. He constantly looks forward to his future. However, when the Wingfields treat him as a 'hero' in the candlelight, he too goes down the memory lane. He reminisces about his basketball glory and the yearbook photographs. But the spell evaporates as soon as the unicorn breaks. Ironically, he wakes up only to slip into the 'American dream'! Cadullo rightly infers that flashbacks are a result of a "representational world we all recognize and accept" much like the 'American dream'.

Conclusion

The Glass Menagerie then becomes a tale composed by knitting different memories together in Williams' mind and then in Tom's. They try to exorcise the ghosts of their lives by designing a narrative from their memory. Williams uses various devices to shape their narrative in an unrealistic manner but the reality of their experiences render the tale quite 'unrealistically real'. This is perhaps the most explicit paradox of this memory play, the narratives are real by virtue of the past existence of the memories but unrealistic because of the medium they are put forth through.

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