

Symbolic Assessment in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*

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ABSTRACT

Tennessee Williams is one of the modern American dramatists. He was born in Columbus, Mississippi in 1911 and he died in 1983. He was ill-healthed suffering from diphtheria and partial paralysis of legs. He wrote many plays including *The Glass Menagerie*. It is one of his best plays. It was produced in Chicago in 1944 and it was published in 1945. Through this play Tennessee Williams depicts the life of America in the 1930s.

According to Tennessee Williams, the use of symbols was a way to express people's sufferings and pains from being stuck in their imaginary thoughts and expectations which are as varied as their dreams. Williams resorts to the art of expressionism in the *Glass Menagerie* as he uses memories, dreams, and illusions as well as symbols and exaggeration to reveal the discomfort of his characters.

The Glass Menagerie is written to show the unhappy life of people who live in a world full of frustration and despair, in which disappointment and fear control the whole atmosphere of the 1930s. In this play, Williams tries to make people release themselves from their self-deception by going back to spiritual ethics so that they can achieve happiness and relief in their life through which his characters fail to do so.

Key Words: *The Glass Menagerie* , Tom , Laura and Amanda

***The Glass Menagerie* is an autobiographical play. It is worthy to quote Ruby Cohn and Bernard Dukore's comment on this point:**

Part of the interest in The Glass Menagerie is the play's autobiographical aspect. Not only do the characters resemble Williams' family, but he has given the narrator his own first name, which writers rarely do. Like the fictional Tom, he worked in the ware-house of a shoe factory for sixty-five dollars a month, wrote poetry, and used movies as a way escaping reality. Although his father was not a telephone man who fell in love with long distances and did not desert his family, he was a traveling salesman. His mother, like Amanda, was a southern belle, a member of the D. A. R. and she even confiscated his copy of D. H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover. His sister Rose, like Laura, was shy and withdrawn; she too had an unfortunate experience at secretarial school and owned a collection of glass animals"! (Dukore F. Bernard 1966, 333).

From the foregoing quotation we conclude that there are many similarities between the content of the play and the playwright's real life. Therefore, we can call it a memory play. Sharad Rajimwale comments that through this play "Tennessee Williams deals with the problem of human relationship within a family that has come under the grim shadow of crisis" (Rajimwale, Sharad 2006, 78).

There are five characters in *The Glass Menagerie*. Amanda (the mother), Tom (the son and the narrator at the same time), Laura (the daughter), Jim O'Connor (the gentleman caller) and Mr. Wingfield (the absent father). All the episodes take place in the flat of the Wingfields' family. Here Tennessee Williams depicts the struggles inside the human beings particularly when they face any difficult situation such as the characters in this play. In other words he deals with the human nature, precisely with the inner and external features of human nature. He is also a good observer. He can depict to us real characters. He witnesses everything therefore, his characters are real ones. Rajimwale better explains this point:

He was remarkably gifted with observation power which enabled him to make his way smoothly through towns and streets and go on producing one after the other bright works. His humanistic perception developed extraordinarily adding amazing depth to his characters. It must be noted here that most of the great writers have acquired depth in their accepting of people and life by living among them be they novelists like Maxim Gorky, Charles Dickens, D. H. Lawrence, poets like Robert Frost and Whitman or dramatists like Sean O'Casey, Chekov and Synge. In the case of Tennessee Williams both comprehensive reading of the works of D. H. Lawrence, Hart Crane, Rilke, Lorca, Rimbaud and Melville, and direct contact with public people's life informed most of his life-vision" (Ibid).

The play contains seven scenes. There are many themes such as the absence of mutual understanding, reality versus illusion, alienation, loneliness, duty and responsibility.

The absence of common understanding is the main problem in the play. This can be seen between Amanda and Laura and Amanda and Tom. This gap forms many crashes between the characters. Mehdi Zia'ee and Ali Haji Shamsa'ee state that "*the tragic absence of mutual understanding among them is brought out in the first scene emphasizing the fact that each one lives in his or her own universe and is unwilling to come out of it*" (2005, 150). In addition to that, it makes them isolate themselves and be enclosed. Therefore, they try to escape from the real painful world to their illusion. They make their especial world. Sometimes they go back to their past as Amanda or they run away to their dreams like Tom or isolate themselves like Laura. To this point Rajimwale remarks:

The Glass Menagerie is a beautiful study of people harbouring their respective illusions, and steering their path through life with the help of their

illusions. They become the guiding force of their lives and source of vitality. When their illusions are shocked, they wilt and wither (Rajimwale, 628).

Amanda always remembers her past when she was a belle and when her suitors were seventeen waiting for her reply. She tells her daughter:

"One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain-your mother received-seventeen!-gentlemen callers! sometimes there weren't chairs enough to accommodate them all. We had to send the nigger over to bring in folding chairs from the parish house (Williams, Tennessee 1966, i. 343).

Amanda tries her best to be a good mother. She always tries to force her opinions. She wants from her children follow her ideas whether they are right or wrong. understand the needs of her children. Her role is important She does not because "*she is a mover*" (Zia'ee and Shamsa'ee, 149) of the play. She reasons many pains to her children especially to Laura. Amanda follows one thing She wants Laura be married to a gentleman caller. Therefore, she asks Tom many times to find such a man: "*I remember suggesting that it would be nice for your sister if you brought home some nice young man from the warehouse. I think that I've made that suggestion more than once*" (v.364). So, Amanda wants Laura to be like her. She does not identify that Laura is different. Laura does not like to make herself like a show to everyone. She is shy and cripple. These two things make Laura isolate herself from the others. Laura prefers to live with her glass animals. She has a collection of them. They are so delicate and she always cleans them. There is similarity between Laura and those glass menagerie. Both of them are delicate and easy broken. Kian Pishkar states that Laura is "*like the animals in her glass menagerie, remains delicate and vulnerable*" (Pishkar, Kian 2000, 642). This means Laura can be damaged easily if there is no protection. Also she "*possesses beauty as*

fine glass does and an inner light varying shades of color" (ibid). Laura could not cope with the demands of the outer world. Therefore, she prefers to withdraw and isolate herself. The mother could not understand this matter. She does not listen to her daughter when she told her mother that she is not able to open the door to her brother and Jim. Laura feels that if she opens the door her end will come soon. And her fears become true. Jim encourages her to be confident. She must forget shyness and must face life. His talk gives her relief and happiness. While they were dancing he hit the unicorn and broke its horn. At the beginning Laura did not care for that. Laura says: "*It doesn't matter. Maybe it's a blessing in disguise*" and "*I'll just imagine he had an operation. The horn was removed to make him feel less-freakish*" (vii.393)! But this accident represents a bad omen to Laura. Sooner she is going to lose this happiness when she discovers that Jim is going to marry Betty. She is shocked by this truth and she decides to return to her isolation. Thus, "*Tennessee Williams presents before us a brilliant representation of the sensitive relation between a daughter and mother far removed from one another emotionally. Each one of them is shut off in a world of her own*" (Rajimwale, 21).

The relationship between Amanda and Tom is not good. Tom dislikes his life. He hates the routine. He dislikes working in the factory. He likes adventure. Therefore, he always goes to movies to compensate for adventure in his life. Tom's dream is to travel and be a wanderer. This means he escapes to the life of the movies (illusion). Tom tells his mother: "*I go to the movies because-I like adventure. Adventure is something I don't have much of at work, so I go to the movies*" (iv.359). Also Tom loves poetry. He tries to compose poems. There is a similarity between Tom and the playwright. "*Tom's painful experiences and his mental dilemma reflect Tennessee Williams's own anguishes when he used to work in the shoe company*

where he had no interest and used to come home to work at night for long hours to write short stories and poems" (ibid, 23).

Amanda wants Tom to be responsible towards his sister. She knows that Tom is careless. He will not look after his sister because he wants to be like his father (a wanderer). Amanda tells Tom:

As soon as Laura has got somebody to take care of her, married, a home of her own, independent-why, then you'll be free to go wherever you please, on land, on sea, whichever way the wind blows you! But until that time you've got to look out for your sister. I don't say me because I'm old and don't matter! I say for your sister because she's young and dependent. (iv. 360-361).

When Tom fails in his mission because he brings the wrong man, he decides to leave everything behind him.

Amanda does not succeed as a mother because she causes pain to her daughter. Amanda lives in her illusion and when she wakes up it is too late. It is the responsibility of the mother to take care of her children and show them the right way. Also the most important thing is that she should understand the needs of her children. She should share with them their pains and try to reduce these pains. Unfortunately Amanda does the opposite. She rises their pains and sufferings. So, Amanda fails in her responsibility. She is a failure. She always "accuses her children that they are being cut off from 'reality. They isolate themselves from real world and live with their dreams" (27-28). While her children try many times to make her understand them, she rejects that. Therefore,

"both escape the painful awareness of the realities that surround them so often. The presence of Amanda's practical self and her down-to-earth talk

disturb them both, because they cannot both face her logic, nor can they understand her point of view" (21).

Jim O'Connor represents the real world to Wingfield's family. He is the intruder. His role is important because through him all the illusions fall down. He is a gentleman caller. He works with Tom. Tom invites him to have dinner with the family. During that evening Jim reveals the hard truth with which he is engaged and is going to marry Betty. This truth is like the storm to Laura and Amanda. There are many indications that what Amanda is planning will not be achieved for example there was a storm at that evening. It represents a bad omen. Also Laura looks ill and she does not want to open the door to Tom and Jim She is afraid to open the door. This means she is afraid of the outside world.

Frustration exists in this play. Each one of the characters tries to communicate with others. They want to say many things to each other but they could not express what is in their hearts. Only Tom through his role as a narrator understands the characters and what they like and wish.

Heredity is another feature in *The Glass Menagerie*, as it is shown in the similarity between Amanda and Laura. Amanda was deserted by her husband for good while Laura is deserted by men for good. Mohammed Baqir Twaij states that: "*A wife unwanted by her husband is in the same situation as a single woman unwanted by men. Both have become victims for the rigid circumstances they are living in*" (Twaij, Mohammed Baqir 2003, 14-15).

Tom is also like his father. He wants to leave his family for good and be a wanderer. The conversation between Tom and Jim reveals this truth:

Tom: "I paid my dues this month, instead of the light bill".

Jim: "You will regret it when they turn the light off".

Tom: "I won't be here".

Jim: "How about your mother"?

Tom: "I'm like my father. The bastard son of a bastard! See how he grins?
And he's been absent going on sixteen years!"

Jim: "You're just talking, you drip. How does your mother feel about"?

Tom: "Shhh!-Here comes Mother! Mother is not acquainted with my plans!"
(vi.378)

There are many symbols in *The Glass Menagerie* such as the fire escape represents " *possibility of freedom from boredom and frustration for many of the people within the apartments*" (Pishkar, 646). The warehouse symbolizes monotony. The movies represent illusions for desperate people such as Tom. The blue rose is the nickname for Laura by which Jim used to call her when they were in the high school. "This suggests both her odd beauty and her isolation, as blue roses exist nowhere in real world" (Zia'ee and Shamsa'ee, 150). The glass unicorn together with the entire glass menagerie represent Laura. They are so delicate and fragile. They can easily break. So Laura is similar to this collection. She is delicate and easy broken and sensitive. It is good to say that "*Laura is the axis around which the plot turns, and the most prominent symbols (blue roses, the glass unicorn, the entire glass menagerie) all in some sense represent her*" (ibid). Jim also represents something to Wingfield's family. To Amanda Jim represents the chance to recapture her past. She wishes Jim to be her daughter's beau To Laura Jim signifies redemption from her isolation and isolation. In other words Jim refers to the worldly happiness and success. To Tom Jim represents the motive to break the monotonous life.

There are many unrealistic features in *The Glass Menagerie* such as the illusions of the characters, the usage of the narrator, music, screen and light. All of them are unrealistic because they cannot represent real life.

Moreover, *The Glass Menagerie* is a problem play. It deals with a simple family. All the members of this family are not able to cope with the real life. They are weak. They do not have the strong will to face any problem. "*It is a problem and serious play whose characters have no free will, as they can no successfully cope with their social environment. They live in an environment which they cannot easily change*" (Twaij, 16).

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that all the characters of *The Glass Menagerie* are suffering great pains, alienations and discomfort with each other because they are not sociable and do not mix with their social environment. The absence of freedom leads to break up the family members particularly when Mr. Wingfield deserted them. Tom is also on the steps of his father as he also abandoned the family to get a good life. Instead of paying the light bill as he is supposed to do, he pays his due for getting the membership in the union of merchant Seaman. Laura is crippled and withdrawn. Amanda is obliged due to poverty, to sell magazine subscriptions and women's underwear to earn money the family is in need for. Furthermore, they try to get rid of their life troubles and achieve success in life. Man has to feel confident of himself to face the difficulties and life's hardships in order to achieve his goals in this modern and complicated world. Laura and Amanda are associated with fear and poverty. The whole play is surrounded by social, psychological, physical and economic powers which enforce their stress on the characters to be losers despite their attempts to overcome their obstacles, but these attempts do not reach success.

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