



Confinement and Freedom in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*

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Abstract

This research paper deals with Tennessee Williams' treatment of a specimen of tortured people suffering from being stuck in their imaginary thoughts and expectations which are as varied as their dreams. Williams resorts to the art of Expressionism in his play entitled *The Glass Menagerie* as he uses memories, dreams, illusions as well as symbols and exaggeration to reveal the emotions, pains and discomfort of his characters.

The Glass Menagerie is written to show the miserable life of people live in a world full of frustration and depression, in which failure and fear underlie the atmosphere of 1930s - Europe when it was at the edge of the outbreak of the horrible and devastating World War II (1939-45).

In this play, Williams tries to make people release themselves from their self-deception by going back to spiritual values so that they can achieve happiness and relief in their life though the play's characters fail to do so.

المستخلص

يختص هذا البحث بمعالجة تنيسي وليمز لعينة من الناس المعذبين الذين يعانون من التصاقهم بأفكارهم وتطلعاتهم الخيالية المتنوعة كأحلامهم. أستعان وليمز في مسرحيته الموسومة معرض الحيوانات الزجاجية بفن المذهب التعبيري عندما استخدم الذكريات، الأحلام، الأوهام، الرموز والمبالغة ليظهر المشاعر، الآلام والقلق لشخصيات المسرحية.

كُتبت مسرحية معرض الحيوانات الزجاجية لعرض الحياة البائسة لأناس يعيشون في عالم ملء بالإحباط والكآبة حيث الفشل والخوف يشكلان أساس الجو المساند في الثلاثينات من القرن الماضي في أوروبا حين كانت على حافة نشوب الحرب العالمية الثانية المروعة والمدمرة (1939-1945).

في هذه المسرحية، يحاول وليمز أن يجعل الناس يتحرروا من خداعهم لأنفسهم بالرجوع إلى القيم الروحية لكي يستطيعوا أن يحققوا السعادة في حياتهم رغم أن شخصيات المسرحية قتلوا في فعل ذلك.

The Glass Menagerie is a play written by the American playwright Thomas Lanier Williams, known as Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) whose most events are flashed back to the Great Depression period in the thirties of the last century when the entire world including America was at the edge of the World War II (1939-1945), a war which had traumatized the whole world and its societies, rendering it chaotic and inhumane. This was also a time of personal difficulty for Williams due to his miserable life in which he drew many of his plays' elements from his own personal life. He was born in Columbus, which is the capital and the largest city of the US state of Ohio, to a cruel travelling salesman and a grief-stricken mother. He had an older sister named Rose who suffered from a mental crisis which resulted in a series of psychotic attacks against her that eventually led to her hospitalization. Rose was adored by Williams, thus she had been depicted as the model for several of his female characters, including Laura in this play "whose inner beauty is too delicate to be disclosed to the world."¹

This play is being described by its dramatist as "memory,"²(I, p.3) written in 1944 and considered Williams first major success. It is divided into seven scenes and has four characters in addition to "a fifth character... who doesn't appear except in this larger-than-life-size photograph over the mantel"³. The professors Ruby Cohn (1922-2011) and Bernard F. Dukore (1932-?) point out that the play, to a certain extent, is an autobiography, as it is mostly an account of the playwright's past specific life:

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 of 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 travelling 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.⁴

The play shows the conflict between reality and illusion and the contrast between the present and the past. It is structured upon the principle of presenting a series of events that are arranged

to display the playwright's anguish of his past personal actual experience through the memory of one of his male characters in the play whose name is Tom Wingfield. Tom is both the narrator of the play and a character in it "I am the narrator of the play, and also a character in it. The other characters are my mother, Amanda, my sister Laura, and a gentleman caller who appears in the final scenes" (i.p.3). It is important to mention that Tom's narration is so necessary because it helps unite the loose and disconnected scenes since most of the play's events are episodic and static without tangible action. Roger B. Stain remarks that "What holds the play together are Tom's remembrances of things past, not plot or characterization."⁵

It is a matter of fact that someone's environment is all the circumstances, people, things, and events around them influence their life whether positively or negatively and Williams is one of those people who experienced a miserable, gloomy and unbearable family life in his youth and it seems by writing this play he wants to show how people take refuge in illusion which is something that appears to exist or be a particular thing but does not actually exist or is in reality something else. Therefore, he focuses throughout the play on the assessment and the development of the struggle between reality and illusion in addition to the contrast between the present and the past. Furthermore, Williams concentrates more on Tom the narrator than on Tom the character, because to him characters and plot are of less importance than those scenes of memory since through Tom's memory everything will be revealed concerning historical, social status, economical and psychological backgrounds. Oscar G. Brockett finds in Williams a trend towards the Freudian Psychology when he says that "Williams is concerned principally with those inner psychological realities which can best be depicted by the manipulation (rather than the mere recording) of external elements. It is the complex motivations of Freudian psychology which lie at the root of most of Williams' work."⁶ Apparently, Tom the narrator is different from Tom the character as he wears different clothes in each case. He is normally dressed when he is a character, but when he is a narrator as he appears in the first scene he is "dressed as a merchant sailor,"(i.p.2) while in the last scene he appears dressed as a real sailor who has "travelled around a great deal,"(vii.p.75) to let the spectators know that these scenes are from memory and that he is both the person remembering them and the person who is involved in the scenes.

The play relies on expressionism which is "a twentieth-century artistic theory that advocates the primacy of emotion An expressionist accomplishes his aim through distortion, exaggeration, primitivism and fantasy."⁷ It appeared in Germany around 1905 and it was "a reaction against realism and aimed to show inner psychological realities"⁸. Therefore, it is considered the most important rebellion against realism as it reveals the internal conflicts inside the human mind. The Swedish dramatist August Strindberg (1849-1912) "was the first expressionist playwright. The dramatic techniques of the school owed much to him"⁹. In his play *To Damascus* (1898), Strindberg "created a new kind of drama, dominated by his search for inner peace and shaped by dreams and mystical yearnings rather than by realistic presentation"¹⁰. When reading the *The Glass Menagerie*, one can easily discern that its author Williams is undoubtedly

associated with Strindberg's expressionistic masterpiece *A Dream Play* (1902) as far as memory scenes and internal conflicts are concerned. In the preface to *A Dream Play* Strindberg points out that he makes use of "symbolic fantasy in which time, space, and identity lost their cohesion"¹¹. Furthermore, the English authors Haskell M. Block and Robert G. Shedd confirm that "Williams' usual approach to production remains the modified expressionism ... in ... *The Glass Menagerie*"¹².

Moreover, Williams uses music and light to create a special mood to suit the situation and to emphasize emotional responses as well as to make the play look unrealistic. The function of music is to give an emotional tone to appropriate scenes. It serves as a powerful cue to recall emotional memories. Music and emotions seek to understand the psychological relationship between the human experience of feelings and his gestural behaviour. The music is the link between the narrator with his separate point in time and space and the subject of his story. During each episode, music is played as a reference to the emotion, feelings, and nostalgia which are the atmosphere of the play. Apparently, the playwright is fond of Laura and her fragile glass animals collection thus he allots special music for her, so it is mainly Laura's music as he tells in his notes: "It is primarily Laura's music and therefore comes out most clearly when the play focuses upon her and the lovely fragility of glass which is her image"¹³. In most cases, there is a connection and coordination between music and light to attract the attention of the audience, for instance, when Amanda wants from Laura to ask the moon for a wish concerning good luck, "the violin rises and the stage dims out" (v,p.37).

As long as the play is a work of memory, it is not realistic. It refers to thoughts, dreams, symbols, events, and ceremonies that belong to someone in the past. Throughout the play, the stage is mostly dimmed so that it can provide most of the scenes with the atmosphere of memory simply because such scenes go to the past as Tom explains: "Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic. In memory everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fiddle in the wings"(i, p.3). In another part of the stage multiple beams of light are usually focused on selected areas or actors especially on Laura, hence it is not only Laura's music but also Laura's light when multiple light is frequently directed on her instead of the other characters, for example when Amanda and Tom are engaged in a loud argument about his private behaviour concerning his going "to the movies night after night ... and movies don't let out at two a.m. Come in stumbling. Muttering to yourself like a maniac!"(iii,p.17), Laura is clearly ablaze with light despite that she is standing there motionless and desperate. Obviously, Williams has borrowed from the epic theatre as he imitates the Germanic playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898 – 1956) in using lighted screens on which he projects images and legends for instance, when Tom brings the good news to his mother of bringing a gentleman caller to his sister as his mother previously asked him to do so, a title lighted appears on the screen saying: "The annunciation is celebrated with music"(v, p.31).

Another non-realistic theatrical device is used by Williams at the end of the play when he employs a soundproof glass wall on the stage so that the characters can be seen but with "interior pantomime"(vii,p.75), which is a term "used to describe mime plays,"¹⁴ that means the use of movements and gestures by the characters in order to express something or tell a story without using speech, for example when Amanda speaks to Laura, the audience "cannot hear the mother's speech, her silliness is gone and she has dignity and tragic beauty"(vii,p.75). Moreover, in the early beginning of the play another pantomimic action has been used when "Amanda and Laura are seated at a drop-leaf table. Eating is indicated by gestures without food or utensils"(i, p.3). However, "the audience hears and sees the opening scene in the dining-room through both the transparent fourth wall of the building"(i, p.2).

The play dramatizes the sufferings, failure, and desperation of its protagonists as each one of them has his/her own dreams and illusions that control them. Thus, the play has a little action but a considerable psychological attitude. Alexander W. Allison, Arthur L. Carr and Arthur M. Eastman remark that: "The theatre in which *The Glass Menagerie* is performed becomes the theatre of the mind."¹⁵ For Williams, the play seems to be a form of catharsis leading to get rid of painful memories and strong emotions such as grief, desolation, and rage by expressing them in writing when he excels in producing the creation of the psychologically motivated characters when he employs the use of comedy in scenes of despair and he carefully builds a mood of nostalgia for the past.

Amanda has brought up her children Tom and Laura after her husband's complete abandonment for them years ago. Though she can never totally forget her real world of dejection, poverty, and brutality, she escapes from her current depressed condition by ruminating over her old fantastic memories in order to breathe a sigh of relief. She remembers her happy days when she was young, pretty and an attractive girl as she tells her children that "One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain-your mother received-seventeen!-gentlemen callers! Why, 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"(i,p.5). Amanda remembers her happy old times to avoid the tedious and routine aspects of her life, so that she can improve her psychological situation. It is true that when someone is, for example, in agony, grief, and despair he/ she unconsciously escapes into dreams or deliberately into daydreams about things that they would like to happen, but unfortunately in *The Glass Menagerie* the characters that are keen to see their dreams come true they finally realize that all their dreams completely fail. Amanda's dreams make her cheat Tom and Laura by telling her son that he and his sister are talented and successful while the reality is that they are doomed to failure: "Why, you-you're just full of natural endowments! Both my children-they're unusual children! ... I'm so-proud! Happy and-feel I've-so much to be thankful" (iv, pp.23-24).

In the beginning of the play Amanda's illusion makes her blind to the fact that her daughter is a disabled figure. She refuses to "face facts" (v, p.35) and insists on deceiving herself that Laura's

handicap is in her favour; "I think the difference is all to her advantage"(v,p.36). Her illusion also drives her to try convincing Jim, the alleged future husband for Laura that her daughter is an attractive housewife "it's rare for a girl as sweet and pretty as Laura to be domestic! But Laura is, thank heavens, not only pretty but also very domestic"(vi, p.49). In fact Laura has a reason to appear as a domestic girl as she adheres to her collection of transparent inanimate animals since it symbolizes her fragile condition and it also represents her escape from the busy outside world as well and this makes Laura spends most of her time at home. Besides, she is not totally domestic as Amanda thinks when she tries to free herself from her self-imprisonment as she makes her frequent visits to a zoo so that she can watch various animate animals and birds especially the penguins which she likes because such birds signify her own handicap concerning her unstable walking. Although Laura is beautiful, cute and innocent, she is very depressed and hopeless, thus she often resorts to her collection of the glass inanimate animals in order to relieve herself. Jim who is Laura's alleged gentleman caller succeeds in describing her correctly when he used to nickname her the Blue Roses which symbolize two different things simultaneously. A Blue Rose means beauty, purity, and delicacy and it at the same time means sadness and depression because of the word "blue" which symbolizes sadness and melancholy. For her, Jim represents a temporal pleasure as she feels happy and free with him and he also represents a good chance for her to start a new life but his parting forever leaves her feeling confined, frustrated, and alone again.

Jim is like the other characters in the play. He is failure and dreamer. He is obsessed with the American dream meaning getting freedom, fortune and success easily and quickly as he keeps thinking about wealth when he asks Laura to "Think of the fortune made by the guy that invented the first piece of chewing gum. Amazing, huh?"(vii,p.56). Furthermore, it is an irony to see Jim currently taking a course "In public speaking"(vi,p.45) while at high school he was the "captain of the debating club,"(Ibid). Furthermore, he compares himself to a cow to make Laura thinks that he is timid and contented "Comfortable as a cow!"(vii,p.56). Moreover, he admires Amanda and her children, imagining that they are successful and will have a promising future. However, Jim's feeling of being hopeful about Amanda's family members is only an illusion since it is groundless, basing on faulty calculations.

Amanda has a double character as she is realistic and unrealistic. She is obviously unrealistic when she is unaware that she is a dreamer like the other characters in the play as she does not only cheat her children but also herself when she sometimes for example appears on the stage wearing her old lovely dress which she used to wear in the South where she lived when she was young in order to feel happy and forget her miserable presence: "She wears a girlish frock of yellowed voile with a blue silk sash. She carries a bunch of jonquils-the legend of her youth is nearly revived," (Vi,p.41). By doing so, Amanda is so pleased that she tells Laura proudly that "this is the dress in which I led the cotillion. Won the cakewalk twice at Sunset Hill, wore one spring to the Governor's ball in Jackson,"! (Ibid). Amanda finds an outlet for her dreams and illusions so that she can cope with her current miserable life. She longs for her good old days in the South. For her, the South stands for everything blissful, successful, and respectable, but now

everything good goes in vain just like paradise lost. She is old now and has been deserted by her husband many years ago. Her son is drunkard and good for nothing. Her daughter is crippled and withdrawn and the future of the whole family is uncertain. Furthermore, she is very depressed and hopeless since all her dreams for securing a husband for her daughter are dissipated as she recently discovers that the gentleman caller (Jim) who has been brought by Tom will never ask for Laura's hand because he is already engaged to another girl, obliging her to feel a sudden tender pity not only for herself but also for Laura's. This is the very sad event which psychologically breaks Amanda's heart and hope of finding a suitable husband for her grieving daughter, causing her to be realistic, therefore, she appears in the final scene very exhausted, depressed and frustrated, scolding her son for his selfishness and indifference to his family's appalling condition and confessing bitterly for the first time a feeling of hopelessness and failure, as saying "Go to the movies, go! Don't think about us, a mother deserted, an unmarried sister who's crippled and has no job! Don't let anything interfere with your selfish pleasure! just go, go, go – to the movies!"(vii,pp.74-75). By saying so, it seems that Amanda has got rid of her illusions and become conscious of the unpleasant reality surrounding her and her family.

In fact Amanda and her family's members experience the harsh life surrounding them and the squalid conditions where they live. As a mother, she wants to see her daughter married at least before her death, thus she is concerned about her daughter's spinsterhood and tried her best to find a suitable husband for her. She asks Tom many times to deal with this problem in an efficient way through inviting some lovely gentleman caller to his sister: "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, p.31). Amanda asks her son to do that on condition that the alleged suitor should not be a drunkard: "The last thing I want for my daughter's boy who drinks! ... Old maids are better off than wives of drunkards"! (v, p.33). She also is very keen that the salary of the daughter's future husband should be sufficient to make sure that he will properly support her daughter financially when they get married. Besides, she is not only worried about Laura's future but also about Tom's as she sees the latter spends most of his time in drinking, smoking and going to movies after coming back home from his work. Hence, she keeps asking him to give up his bad habits which might drive his attention away from both job and family. In fact she fears to see Tom lose his job, as this might leave her along with Laura in a difficult financial situation. Therefore, she frequently reproaches him strictly, hoping that he will be changed to be a courageous and virtuous family man:

I think you've been doing things that you're ashamed of. That's why you act like this. I don't believe that you go every night to the movies. Nobody goes to the movies as often as you pretend to. People don't go to movies at nearly midnight, and movies don't let out at two A.M. Come in stumbling. Huttering to yourself like a maniac! You get three hours' sleep and then go to

work. Oh, I can picture the way you're doing down there. Hoping, doing, because you're in no condition!(iii,p.17).

The poor mother is not hesitated to repeat her warnings against drunkenness even in a milder way so that Tom who seemingly pays no attention to his mother's entreaties may obey her: "Promise son you'll-never be a drunkard!"(IV,p.24). Besides, She wants him to quit smoking and do not waste his money due to this bad habit. In addition, she wants him to save money so that he can have a night-school course at a university in order to improve his situation: "You smoke too much. A pack a day at fifteen cents a pack ... figure it out and you will be astounded at what you could save. Enough to give you a night-school course in accounting at Washington U." (V,p.29).

It is a matter of fact that environment and heredity are all-powerful over mankind as they are the two main aspects of realism and in particular naturalism that clearly affect the play's characters. The atmosphere of the play is gloomy since the play has more pessimism than optimism as all characters are failing and frustrated, though the critics John Gassner and Bernard F. Dukore point out that "The Glass Menagerie ... has more light than darkness"¹⁶. Psychologically speaking, heredity and environment are the two most important factors regarding the development of children. They negatively affect Laura concerning marriage. She resembles her mother in being deserted by men. Amanda was deserted by her husband many years ago and Laura has been already deserted by her alleged gentleman caller and it seems that she has no chance to get married. Apparently, Amanda and her daughter fall victims to unpleasant circumstances since both of them are not desired by men.

Tom is also affected negatively by environment and especially heredity as he resembles his father in leaving his family forever. He is inwardly encouraged to leave not only his family but also his town, Saint Louis, where he lives by his thoughts and feelings as he wonders how some people do daring things like the magician who got out of "a nailed-up coffin ... without removing one nail" (iv,p.21). Tom likens his fugitive father to the magician when he contemplates his father's photograph which is now shown lighted on the stage to tell him that his father is just like the magician who has already done a wonderful thing by having got away from his coffin-like home, urging the son to imitate his father and this what Tom did at the end of the play: "I left Saint Louis. I descended the steps of this fire-escape for a last time and followed, from then on, in my father's footsteps, attempting to find in motion what was lost in space," (vii, p.75). The fire escape mentioned above by Tom is a structure used by the characters to leave and enter the apartment but for Tom it symbolizes the gate of freedom because his life from the early beginning of the play is obviously miserable and frustrated as he cannot provide his three family members with a suitable level of living and he is very upset to see his sister's permanent handicap and her imminent spinsterhood. Moreover, he too much hates both his job in the warehouse and the domination of his mother at home. Therefore, he unconsciously resorts to drinking and movies in order to forget his bitter reality and he may get rid of "the fires of human

desperation"(i. p, 1). However, Tom cannot endure his current difficult situation, thus, he flees home through this fire escape, thinking that he can get relief. Unfortunately, Tom's life is getting worse even after having fled home as he expresses grave concern at the terrible situation outdoors when he says that "The cities swept about me like dead leaves, leaves that were brightly coloured but torn away from the branches"(vii.pp.75-76). By saying so, Tom obviously means that the cities where he visits are completely destroyed by the missiles and shells of the Second World War (1939-1945), yet he suffers much more than before as he sees "the world is lit by lightning,"(i. p, 1) and these words above confirm that the world is in fact lightened by the blaze of the explosions and the bombardments of the fierce war which add more depression and frustration to Tom's dejected life.

Conclusion

When reading the play, one can discern easily that all the characters in the play are led astray, suffering great pain and discomfort and the play seems to be serious and problematic since its characters have no free will as they cannot cope with their social environment. Thus, all the family members are defeatists after Mr. Wingfield deserted them many years ago. Tom also is on the steps of his father as he also abandoned the family for the better of himself as he thinks. He is almost good for nothing. Instead of paying the light bill as he is supposed to do, he pays his dues 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 needs. Yet, the atmosphere of the play is predetermined by social, physical, and psychological forces which impose their pressures on the characters to be failing despite their attempts to adapt themselves to their social surroundings so that they can overcome their life's hardships, but their attempts are to no avail. The more they try to get rid of their life troubles, the worse their situation becomes. In order to achieve success in life, man must have faith to feel confident about his ability or goodness. It is a matter of fact that man has been created in agony, thus he should suffer, endure and fight the difficulties and hardships of life he faces throughout his lifetime for achieving what he wants in this modern complicated world. Besides, man should be patient and contented to be happy since happiness will not be attained by taking but by giving and at the same time man should exert great effort to obtain knowledge and wisdom thorough taking from the aged their experience, from the young their purity, from the greats their reverence and dignity and from the poor people their patience.

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- [14] Tennessee Williams', *The Glass Menagerie*, (London: Cox & Wyman Ltd, 1945), scene 1, p.3 All subsequent textual quotations from Williams's play throughout this paper are taken from this reference book. All spellings are kept as in the original.
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