

Memory, Desire and the American Dream in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*

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Abstract:

*Being one of the leading playwrights of the post World War II America Tennessee Williams presents the socio-political conflicts of the contemporary society in *The Glass Menagerie* in the form of a 'memory play'. The period which the play refers to is the Great Depression in America in 1930s. Middle class people suffer most from this, and the Wingfields are the representatives of this class of people. American dream is a way of escape from this suffering, but people are unable to reach it. This American dream is not always for material prosperity and this dream is like a myth.*

Key words: memory play, Great Depression, middle class people, American dream, myth.

Tennessee Williams is one of the leading playwrights of the post World War II America. He was very famous for presenting the socio-political conflicts of the contemporary society, as well as the people's condition in the existing society in his plays. So his plays appear to the reader as realistic plays. In his dramatic career Williams wrote more than twenty full length plays but reached the peak of popularity after the arrival of *The Glass Menagerie* in 1945. This epoch making book makes Williams a world class playwright with a distinctive voice. Through this

drama he portrays a vivid picture of the American society during the first half of the twentieth century. Here he makes an experiment with the dramatic technique. He divides the play into seven scenes. There is no act division at all. He also experiments with light, music and an onstage screen on which words and images are projected. All these devices used here make the play quite exceptional. However, this dissertation analyses the significance of memory, desire and American Dream in this play.

The play begins with an introductory speech by Tom. Here he plays the role of a narrator. “[...] dressed as a merchant sailor”, Tom enters the stage and, “[...] addresses the audience” (*The Glass Menagerie*, 4), from the outside of the play. As a narrator, he makes the audience familiar with the characters, their socio-political background and also with some strategies of the play. Actually, the playwright assigned him to dual roles. He is both the narrator and the central character of the drama. Thus he opens and closes the play. Here he recollects the incidents before he left his mother and sister in a very difficult situation of the economic depression. Except Tom’s speech there is not much action in the play, everything is the revelation of his point of view about the other characters of the play. There are several loops of memories too. For example, on the first hand, it is Tom’s memory; while on the other hand, Amanda and Laura too recapitulate their past memory within Tom’s memory.

All the characters in this play are obsessed with their present condition. Amanda’s obsession is because of her husband’s desertion in the midst of poverty and responsibility. In this situation she is struggling as a single mother for her two children. Her son Tom works at a shoe factory to fulfil the needs of his family, but he desires for a successful poetic career. For her physical disability Laura has a very little hope of finding a husband, so she lives in her imaginary world of ‘glass menagerie’. Thus all of them try to take refuge from their

present condition with the help of their past memories.

As a result of this here memory is integrally related with the desires of each character. Amanda recalls the social position in the Blue Mountain in contrast with the present situation in St. Louis. It gives her a scope to ignore the present condition. Although she recapitulates those incidents to encourage Laura because she has lost her desires to get a good 'gentleman caller' as her husband. It is also Amanda's desire to see her daughter's future financially secured, for she knows very well that "Girls that aren't cut out for business careers usually wind up married to some nice man" (*The Glass Menagerie*, 17). In the later part of the play we can also see that Amanda is living in her memories when she appears in " [...] a girlish frock of yellowed voile with a blue silk sash" (*The Glass Menagerie*, 53). She was used to wear it on Sundays to meet the gentlemen callers in her youth. She wears it again when Jim came to their house. She revives her youth by taking Jim as the gentleman caller.

For Laura, memory is more nostalgic in its turn. She herself is the symbol of the 'glass animals' because of her fragile and timid nature. Before the first appearance of Laura and her glass collection on the forefront of the stage, the audience can hear the musical piece entitled "Glass Menagerie" (*The Glass Menagerie*, 10). She is afraid of the modern world, thus lives with her glass collection. Things made of glass are very fragile in nature because a gust of air can destroy it. In the play there are not much instances of Laura's memory. For the first time she recollects the man whom she idolised at her school at the end of the second scene. She admires him very much but does not say anything to him. That is why when Jim O'Connor comes to their apartment, she becomes nervous. For a few moments she thinks that she is living her dream, but after Jim's revelation about his relationship with another girl, her all hopes are shattered. And to escape it she again goes to her own world of the glass animals and her old record player.

Tom too was obsessed with his present condition during

the depression of thirties. His depression was due to his father's abandonment because he was left as the only man to earn for his family. Tom introduces him as "a fifth character [...] who does not appear except in this larger-than-life-size photograph over the mantle.[....] left us a long time ago" (*The Glass Menagerie*, 5). The whole Wingfield family suffered for this alcoholic 'telephone man' because he left them in the midst of misfortune. But he has an overwhelming influence on the memory of the other Wingfield characters. Amanda always recalls him as the part of her happy life but ironically she makes him responsible for her misfortune. On the other hand she dislikes this alcoholic nature of Mr. Wingfield. That is why, she worries about her son's alcoholic nature and love for adventure. Actually she becomes afraid of their devastating insecure life. For Laura, her father's memory is present in the old victrola, which takes her into a nostalgic situation beyond the real world. Tom is so much overwhelmed by his father's memory that following his father's example he also leaves his family, with the desire to reach the 'South Sea Island' of adventure. He follows his father's path and goes with the Merchant Marine Naval Company leaving his mother and sister in a critical situation. Thus he escapes from the imprisoned life of the Wingfield apartment literally, but actually he can not.

That is why, more than a decade after, he comes back from his voyage and makes a very meticulous narration of the incidents, which he recollects from his memory. The young Tom whom we encounter in the play is the embodiment of older Tom's consciousness. Everything which the audience see here is, not the action of the play but the action of Tom's mind. Thus memory for him is not a kind of escape, but a means to retreat to the past. The more he tries to escape; he is more entrapped in them. That is why at the end of the play, Tom says,

"Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into the movies or a bar, I buy a drink,

I speak to the nearest stranger---anything that can blow your candles out![...]”(*The Glass Menagerie*, 97).

Therefore, it is Tom’s feeling of guilty that haunts him during his life of adventure and also entraps him in his memories. And *The Glass Menagerie* is truly a depiction of Tom’s memory. Here the playwright and the narrator make a very successful use of this aspect.

Tennessee Williams portrays the real condition of the contemporary American society in the form of a ‘memory play’. While on the other hand, at the very beginning of the play the narrator says,

“[...], I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasure disguise of illusion” (*The Glass Menagerie*, 4).

So, from the very beginning, the narrator too, makes it clear that the play has the touch of unreality over reality. He also says,

“The play is a memory. Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic. In memory everything seems to happen in music. That explains the fiddle in the wings” (*The Glass Menagerie*, 5).

Therefore, here the dramatist uses several stage devices to make the drama a memory play. For instance, the episodic structure is used to intensify the incoherent nature of memory. Each scene is complete in itself. These are very loosely held together with the thread of Tom’s memories. Secondly the use of light is also very significant for the play. Throughout the play only dim light is used to suggest the hazy atmosphere of memory. Thirdly, the use of an onstage screen on which legends and images are projected also plays a very important role here. It acts like a dividing line between reality and unreality,

between memory and real experience. But the most important theatrical device used here is music. Sometimes music is an internal part of the action, and sometimes it comes from the external world. When it is within the play, both the characters and the audience can hear it. But when it is from the outside, the audience only can hear it. For example before Tom apologizes to Amanda the song "Ave Maria" is heard softly in the scene four. Therefore here this song gives hint of the probable incident of the play. All through 'the glass menagerie' music is like a recurrent theme of the play, it is related with Laura and her collection of glass animals. These songs are heard by the audience only. But the song which comes from the Paradise Dance Hall is heard by both Tom and the audience. The song "The World Is Waiting for the Sunshine!" (*The Glass Menagerie*, 39), suggests something about the approaching World War II and the contemporary social situation. In the present context it suggests the news of Jim's arrival in their apartment, which may shine the dull life of his sister. Nevertheless, in each cases music is related to a nostalgic emotion, and as a memory play, the first condition of *The Glass Menagerie* is also nostalgia. So music is central for this play.

Another American playwright Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman* too is a memory play where the music of flute is very important. In both plays music intensifies the nostalgic mood of the play. But the difference between these two plays is that Miller uses memory as a technique in the *Death of a Salesman*, whereas it is both the theme and the technique in Tennessee Williams' play.

However, the socio-political condition of the contemporary American society is very important for this play. Tennessee Williams wrote *The Glass Menagerie* after the World War II is over, but the period which the play refers to is 1930s. It was the time of Great Depression in America,

[...] when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind. Their eyes had failed them, [...], so they were having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the

fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy”(The Glass Menagerie,5).

Therefore, the play also reflects on the condition of the middle class people in the existing society.

Actually, from the very beginning of the Twentieth century, the economic system of America is dependent on the productive capacities of various industries. Therefore, a large number of people from rural areas came to America in search of job and material success. But a very few of them were able to attain their desired success. They were largely exploited by the existing system. And during the Great Depression country's economic condition faced a very hard time. The primary reason behind this recession was the difference between the country's productive capacity and the people's capacity to purchase. So the economic system shattered, factories shut down and resulted a large number of unemployment. Though in this economic downturn people from every strata of society were affected, but the condition of the middle class and the immigrants was the worst. They have lost their individuality and were looking for their identity.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, the Wingfields are the representatives of,” [...] this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism” (*The Glass Menagerie*, 1). Here Tom narrates some past memories of that period of America. His family also belongs to the agrarian south of America. But now they live in an apartment in St. Louis, Missouri. Tennessee Williams compares that apartment with hives and, therefore, the people who live within it are like bees, the working class. Everybody in this situation is obsessed with their own condition, therefore, they try to escape from it. They try to reach their happy days of the past with the help of their memories and desires. And these memories and desires somehow lead them to achieve their American Dream.

The term American Dream has several implications, but essentially it suggests that through hard work one can achieve the desired thing to live happy, prosperous life. This idea is older than the United States of America. A great number of people from England came to the new land and established a new country. Behind this establishment of new land their desire was to live a prosperous life without any social or religious bondage. Therefore, American Dream equates desire for happiness. But attaining this prosperity is not very simple for all the Americans. Because apparently America is a classless society but it is not true all the time. People are discriminated on the basis of monetary power.

In Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* some features of American dream are also manifested through the characters. Especially Amanda and Jim O'Connor's desires truly lead them to their American Dream. Amanda's dream incorporates her desire to see her children prosperous and happy in the existing society. She takes her children as something extraordinary, therefore, ignores their deformities and says "Both my children—they're unusual children! Don't you think I know it? I'm so proud! Happy [...]" (*The Glass Menagerie*, 31). She projects her aspirations on them to fulfil her own desire, sometimes she appears as a controlling power over Tom and Laura. So she sends her at Rubicam's Business College to make her future secured as a working woman. But when she comes to know that Laura is unable to adjust herself with the speed of the typewriter, thus leaves the institution she becomes worried and says, "What are we going to do, what is going to become of us, what is the future?" (*The Glass Menagerie*, 12)? Because she knows it very well that society will be very harsh to a girl like Laura who lives in her own world. She needs a financial security. So she thinks in another way to secure Laura's future. She seeks for a hardworking gentle man as her husband and also tries to manage an amount of money to spend on Laura's wedding. She becomes so desperate that she

calls several women to subscribe to a glamour magazine.

Her attitude to Tom is not much different from it. She thinks that one day her son will bring them financial security and happiness by working sincerely in the shoe company. So she ignores the fact that Tom dislikes his job and wants to get rid of this boring lifestyle. And always gives him advice "Try and you will succeed!" (*The Glass Menagerie*, 31) and to "Rise and Shine". All these underscore the basic features of the American Dream. That is why; he always reminds Tom that his job is very much important for the security of their family. So she dislikes Tom's fondness of drinking, smoking and watching movies and also says him that he has no right to jeopardize their security by leaving them on the crisis. Even she advises her son to reduce his smoking habit, so that he can save some money for a night course, which will help him to improve his career.

Although it is her desire to reach the American dream, but like other Americans she is unable to attain it. She has the desire to live a happy wealthy life, but what she actually does is,

"Wished for on the moon. Success and happiness for my precious children! I wish for that whenever there is moon, and whenever there isn't, I wish for it, too" (*The Glass Menagerie*,40).

Except Amanda, the character of Jim O'Connor shows the true embodiment of the American Dream. As Tom says in the first scene that "He is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart from[...],he is the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for"(The Glass Menagerie,5).In this play he is the symbol of hope and desire. He is the high school boy whom Laura admires and loves. He is also the gentleman caller of the play and also desired by Amanda, for her daughter. Jim appears in the play in the sixth scene, but from the very first every member of Wingfield family expects someone to rescue

them from the present condition.

But Jim is like other ordinary Americans. In his school days he was very popular and

“seemed to move in a continual spotlight. He was a star [...] always running or bounding, never just walking. He seemed always at the point of defeating the law of gravity”(*The Glass Menagerie*,50).

But after graduation his speed slowed down but he does not become disappointed. He is ambitious and hard working. He continues his study of engineering at night to improve his condition. Thus he tries to adjust himself with the scientific development of the modern world. Like the other characters he does not try to escape the reality but to triumph over it. So once he says to Laura, ” I am disappointed but I am not discouraged” (*The Glass Menagerie*, 78).Therefore, he represents the unrealized dream of success which every American tries to reach but a few can attain.

Truly he is the symbol of American dream because Laura loves him from his school days. So she has a desire to get him as her husband. But for her physical disability she never expresses her feeling to him. But when Jim comes to their apartment her desires begin to rejuvenate. But a few moments later it again becomes unattainable for Laura because Jim is engaged. Therefore, Laura’s American dream is not for material prosperity but for happiness.

The dream of Tom also opposes the materialistic notion of American dream. He does not like to work at the shoe factory; for he thinks that there he has lost his individuality. He dreams of a successful poetic career. According to Tom, to succeed in such kind of dream what is needed is the desire for adventure, because it will help him to gather experience and knowledge. Adventure does not need much hard work too. For that Tom takes the help of movies, magic shows, alcohol etc .For him these are also the means of escape from the real world to a world of fantasy and desire. So he is very much anti-

capitalistic in his attitude. Therefore except Jim, the American Dream in *The Glass Menagerie* is just like a myth for the other characters and also integrally related to their memory and desires.

Although in the Production Notes Tennessee Williams himself writes,

Being a "memory play", *The Glass Menagerie* can be presented with unusual freedom of convention. Because of its considerably delicate or tenuous material, atmospheric touches and subtleties of direction play a particularly important part[....] When a play employs unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that a closer approach to truth.

However being a "memory play", this play has also some affinities with Tennessee Williams' own life. So far as the play is concerned, the likeness within *The Glass Menagerie* and Tennessee Williams' personal life are, the similarity between the playwright's childhood name and the narrator's name, both of them live in St. Louis, Tennessee Williams also worked in a shoe factory and dreamt to be a successful author. His father also emotionally abandoned them like Tom's father "who fell in love with long distances" (*The Glass Menagerie*, 5). The character of Amanda is also a reflection of the playwright's mother, who always wants to stick to the rituals of her bygone days. Furthermore Laura, Tom's shy and timid sister is also a replica of Williams' elder sister Rose. Thus memory is one of the recurrent themes of this play which the dramatist used to compelling his desire to write a play based on the real life characters.

Although, in *The Glass Menagerie*, the characters are drawn from the playwright's own memories and experiences but the events have not much association with the events of playwright's personal life. Actually he fictionalises his memories and constructs a new story. Thus the play achieves universality, and is not merely confined into the author's past

but depicts the condition of the middle-class people in the American society during a period of transformation and conflict.

WORK CITED

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