

A Psychoanalytic Study of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a psychoanalytic study of Tennessee Williams's memory play *The Glass Menagerie*. Set against the backdrop of the great depression period of America, this play is a dramatic rendering of the anxieties, frustrated desires and hopes of a poor family called Wingfields. The family comprises of a crippled daughter named Laura, a son named Tom and their mother named Amanda. Tortured by the nightmarish reality of their existence, they escape into their respective fantasy worlds. Laura escapes into her imaginary world of glass animals in which she identifies herself with a Unicorn. Tom resorts to alcoholism and movies. Amanda escapes into her past cherishing her sweet memories when she used to be courted by a line of gentleman callers. This paper posits the view that memories and dreams are a form of surreal mode of human existence in which our mind constantly works at appropriating the realities of our life. This argument of the paper will be developed in the light of Sigmund Freud's seminal work *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

Keywords : Memory, Neurosis, Psychoanalysis, Surreal

INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams's, *The Glass Menagerie* is a memory play, which was staged for the first time in 1944. The play has autobiographical elements in it. The basic idea of the story has got many parallels with the authors own life. The central character of this play, Tom, plays a double role. He acts both as the narrator as well as a character in the play. As the narrator of the play, he introduces the play to the audience. 'Memory play is a term coined by Tennessee Williams to describe non-realistic dramas, such as *The Glass Menagerie*, in which the audience experiences the past as remembered by a narrator' (*Literary Terms and Definitions*). Set against the backdrop of the great depression period of America, this play is a dramatic rendering of the anxieties, frustrated desires and hopes of a poor family comprising of a crippled daughter named Laura, a son named Tom and their mother Amanda Wingfield. Tortured by the nightmarish reality of their existence, they escape into their respective fantasy worlds. Laura escapes into her imaginary world of glass animals in which she identifies herself with a unicorn, an imaginary/unreal horse with one horn. Tom resorts to alcoholism and movies to escape from the harsh reality of his life. Amanda escapes into her past cherishing her sweet memories when she used to be courted by a line of gentleman callers as a southern belle. The inability of the Wingfields to accept the reality of life, their failure in communicating with one another and lack of will to come out of this situation triggers neurosis in them. Neurosis is a state of human mind marked mainly by anxiety, fear and depression. In

its extreme state, it is characterized by a very low self esteem, inability to socialize and often slipping into a surreal existence. Consequently, they suffer from the feelings of anxiety, depression and low self esteem.

Sigmund Freud in his book, *Civilization and its Discontents* which was translated into English by James Strachey (1930), has said that the main source of unhappiness among civilized people is civilization itself. Freud has discussed the various problems which individual faces in order to get adjusted in a civilized society. According to Freud,

“Life, as we find it, is too hard for us; it brings us too many pains, disappointments and impossible tasks. In order to bear it we cannot dispense with palliative measures.... There are perhaps three such measures: powerful deflections, which causes us to make light of our misery; substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it; and intoxicating substances which make us insensible to it” (*Civilization and its Discontents*).

A psychoanalytic study of the three characters i.e. Amanda, Laura and Tom in the play, *The Glass Menagerie*, reflects that in the minds of all of these characters, there is a continuous struggle between Ego, Superego and Id. As described in the play about these characters, Amanda Wingfield is “a woman of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place... She is not paranoiac but her life is paranoia” (*The Glass Menagerie*). She has preserved her past in her mind and whenever she feels that her present is not going as per her will, her mind moves towards her past and she loves to narrate the things from her past. Laura Wingfield has failed to establish contact with reality and is like a piece of her own collection of glass menagerie “too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf” (*The Glass Menagerie*). Her crippled body has left her in a situation where she feels that she cannot move with the external world and has created a world of her own. Tom Wingfield is a poet and not satisfied with the job in the shoe warehouse. “His nature is not remorseless, but to escape from a trap he has to act without pity” (*The Glass Menagerie*). The description of Wingfield apartment in which the family is living is itself the representation of the way lower-middle-class families were living after the year of great depression. As described in the play, “those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units...” (*The Glass Menagerie*). The father of Tom and Laura has left them and only a photograph of him is hanging on the wall.

Every time, we find in the play that Amanda keeps on directing her children, how to eat, how to comb, or how to dress, which Tom does not like. This is seen when Tom says to her mother, “I haven’t enjoyed one bite of this dinner because of your constant directions on how to eat...” (*The Glass Menagerie*). Since Tom is not happy with the life he is living, whenever there is an argument with his mother he ends it with a cigarette. Amanda is very much concerned about Laura. She wants her “to stay fresh and pretty—for gentlemen caller” (*The Glass Menagerie*). Laura is shy and is not able to socialize with the people outside. She knows that she is crippled and she is not going to have any gentleman caller, as said by her, “I’m not expecting any gentlemen callers” (*The Glass Menagerie*). She is having low self-esteem and wants to live always in her world of glass animals. As said by Freud in his book, ‘personal happiness is often ignored in the interests of social unity and cohesion’ (*Civilization and its Discontents*). In order to unite socially and to see her mother happy, Laura has to act against her will.

As described by Freud in his book, *The Civilization and its Discontents* that “powerful deflections, which causes us to make light of our misery” Amanda is always deflecting from her present towards her past. She describes from her past that she used to have many handsome and wealthy gentleman callers, of whom she

remembers each and everything. Time and again, she tells her children about the seventeen gentleman callers which she once had in her past. In her life, the moments of happiness lie in her past. She was attracted towards the charm of Mr Wingfield and she is having regret for marrying Mr Wingfield, who left her to survive on her own along with her children. Amanda is trying to find a substitute in the form of her Son-in-Law as she knows that Tom might leave them like his father. Her worry is reflected when she tells Tom, “What right have you got to jeopardize your job? Jeopardize the security of us all? How do you think we’d manage if you were—” (*The Glass Menagerie*). She wants the happiness of her daughter Laura. She never calls her crippled but instead, she used the word defect for the drawback in her daughter. “Nonsense! Laura, I’ve told you never, never to use that word. Why, you’re not crippled, you just have a little defect- hardly noticeable, even!” (*The Glass Menagerie*). She is living in a world of illusion, and Tom always reminds his mother “to face the facts” She expects many gentleman callers for her daughter. She is afraid that her daughter may end up as an old maid. She wants to keep pace with civilization and to move with the external world. And when she fails, she turns away towards her past as southern belle. In the Words of Freud, “Against the dreaded external world, one can only defend oneself by some kind of turning away from it, if one intends to solve the task by himself” (*Civilization and its Discontents*).

Laura tells her mother about Jim whom she likes since her school days. He used to call her “Blue Roses”. Just like the unicorn, an imaginary horse from her glass menagerie, blue roses also reflect the uniqueness of the character of Laura. Her old records and her glass menagerie are the only things important to her. And in order to escape from the harsh reality of her life, she escapes into this illusionary world which she has created for herself. As said by the Freud that if one has to be happy in any way, he has to break from the reality.

Laura likes Jim right from her school days. When Tom invites Jim O’ Connor to dinner as a gentleman caller, and when Laura comes to know that he is the same person, she gets nervous and again her low self-esteem is reflected. In a conversation between them, Jim tries to remove the “Inferiority complex” in Laura and tries to boost her confidence. “Somebody needs to build your confidence up and make you proud instead of shy and turning away...”(*The Glass Menagerie*). Laura tells him about her glass animals and also shows him her old records. He dances with Laura and also kissed her, but soon he reveals that he is engaged and in between the horn of her unicorn also gets broken. Unicorn, which was symbolic of the uniqueness of Laura turns into an ordinary horse. She gave that piece of glass animal to Jim. The breaking of Unicorn’s horn has a symbolic message. It signifies that Laura must acknowledge the reality of her life and she must come out of her imaginary world of glass animals. The world of her dreams is as fragile as the glass and it cannot bear the hard smashes of reality.

In the words of Freud, the mental life of these characters, “exhibits oscillations between a comparatively easy liberation of pleasure and comparatively difficult one” (*Civilization and its Discontents*). As said by Freud, “The intoxicating substances influence our body and alter its chemistry.” Tom is finding solace in the world of intoxication and in the movies. He is a poet and does not like his job in the shoe warehouse. He has revealed his plan to Jim that he is going to leave his family and he does the same. But the images of his sister Laura are always with him and the play ends with the memories of Laura still occupying his mind.

FINDINGS

- 1.The socio-economic condition as well as the physical and mental well being of individuals is one of the key factors in determining the quality of their lives. The Wingfields are invariably weak at all these fronts.
- 2.The psychological crisis in Wingfields is mainly due to their inability to accept the reality of their life.
- 3.One of the main cause of neurosis in individuals is their inability to overcome the feeling of 'being stuck up' mentally as well as physically. The Wingfields are living a stagnant life in which nothing seems to be changing. They suffer from a sense of entrapment which constantly aggravates their neurosis.
4. Memories and dreams are a kind of "desire gratification" for Wingfields. The present seems hopeless to them. Therefore, they slip into a surreal life of dreams and memories.

CONCLUSION

Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* has an immense psychological significance. The characters in this play harbour clear symptoms of neurosis. Their miserable lives and increasing hopelessness frustrates them to the extent that they cease to be real beings. They take recourse to an unreal life of dreams and memories. Hence, they escape into a surreal existence. The psychological turmoil of Wingfields has its socio-economic causes also. Since this play is set against the backdrop of the great depression period of America, the Wingfields represent the frustrated hopes, desires, dreams and anxieties of the American society during the great depression period of America. The play very effectively dramatizes the gradual psychological disintegration of the individuals of a family constantly failing in their attempts to come to terms with themselves and their lives.

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