

# Expressionism, The Psychological Realism and Other Theatrical Devices Reflected in “The Glass Menagerie” by Tennessee Williams

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**Abstract:** *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams was first staged in 1944 in America with the outbreak of the Second World War. The play marks a unique place in the American theatre due to many reasons, out of which, techniques employed in the drama too contributed immensely towards the overwhelming success, the play achieved. Expressionism among other techniques stands tall in the drama as the emotional sufferings of the American lower middle class in the mid-20th century are exposed in a rather effective manner by Tennessee Williams in the play. His realistic character portrayal and thematic social realism embedded in the play are further reinforced by the super-powerful techniques like expressionism, screen device, memory play, intimate narration, symbolism, etc. *The Glass Menagerie* is an autobiographical play in which we come across the way people get lost in the American dream which had been then developed as an ideal approach for a common man to lead the life one dreams of. The play, however, quite effectively questions the authenticity and practicality of the American dream, the stronger the dreams more the emotional sufferings it carries, is one of the social realities Tennessee Williams showcases in the play rather effectively with the help of powerful and influential techniques he has effectively as well as appropriately employed in the drama.

**Keywords:** expressionism, American dream, technique, memory play, social realism

## 1. Introduction

Thomas Lanier (Tennessee) Williams was born on March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi. He and his sister, Rose had their early childhood in Mississippi. His father, who initially worked for a telephone company and later became a travelling salesman for an international shoe company, was mostly away from home. Tennessee Williams' mother was a daughter of a clergyman and his sister Rose, who is thought to be the model of Laura in “The Glass Menagerie”, was slightly crippled and became a recluse later in her life. Williams' childhood was marred by frequent sicknesses which, in a way, became a blessing in disguise, providing him ample time for reading. During the difficult time, his mother looked after him so well, and his sister, Rose, who was just 16 months older to him, became his constant playmate.

The family moved to St. Louis in 1918 where he began his writing and published his first story in a magazine in 1928. He entered the University of Missouri in 1929 but was unable to perform well at the exams. Hence, he had to leave the university although he won some prizes for writing. After leaving the university, he began to work for a shoe company where he gathered a solid working experience which in turn had influenced his writing immensely. He recalls his experience: "The two years I spent were indescribable to me as an individual but of immense value to me as a writer, for they gave me firsthand knowledge of what it means to be a small wage-earner in a hopelessly routine job" (production notes); this experience has influenced Williams to create the character, Tom, in the play.

Arthur Miller (1915-2005), the most notable contemporary American playwright of Tennessee Williams, also deals with

human suffering in American contexts. “The Glass Menagerie” and Arthur Miller’s “Death of a Salesman” are considered as two of the literary works which seriously question “The American Dream” in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. This period was the most significant time of technological advancement (e. g. television was invented in 1926 by John Logie Baird). The emergence of technology has inspired both the dramatists: Williams introduced “The Screen Device” (Screen Image) in “The Glass Menagerie” (1944) and Miller introduced a “Tape Recorder” in “Death of a Salesman” (1949) through which Miller points out that people have ample time to talk about machines but not about people.

“The Glass Menagerie” was initially based on Williams' short story, “Portrait of a Girl in the Glass” and his once-rejected film script, “The Gentleman Caller”. The play is famously autobiographical; it is mostly his life that he dramatizes with parallels drawn from his true-to-life experiences. Accordingly, the play is mostly related to his own family and their life in St. Louis. Above all, it is Williams' own troubled memory which is acted out on the stage and he is forced to seek relief from pain in memory, fantasy and flight. Fusing realism and symbolism, Williams establishes a delicate tone, skillfully balanced through humour and harshness. Williams also deals with subtle social realities of American life in the mid-twentieth century in which people were 'lost' under diverse circumstances. That is exactly what Tom highlights at the outset of the play: “When huge middle class of American was matriculating in a school for the blind, their eyes have failed them, or they had failed their eyes.” (Scene i) Tom adds the fact that things came too easy for Americans: “In Spain there was revolution (1936). Here there was only shouting and confusion.” (Scene i)

“The Glass Menagerie” was first staged on 26<sup>th</sup> December, 1944 in Chicago's Civic Theatre. Despite the brilliant

performance of the entire cast, the audiences only half filled the theatre and the audience continued to be disappointingly small in first few days. The plans for bringing the play to New York were initially cancelled because the play did not run more than a few weeks in Chicago. However, sparked by extremely positive remarks of Chicago drama critics and enthusiastic word-of-mouth advertising, the audiences became larger and soon they filled the theatre. When "The Glass Menagerie" was staged in New York in March 1945, the play was received with the same responses and enthusiasm that it had in Chicago. "The Glass Menagerie" won the New York Drama critics circle award as the best American play of the 1944-1945 season. Hence, "The Glass Menagerie" established Williams' reputation as a dramatist (it is often considered as his best play although "The Street Car named Desire" also gained much reputation). The play, not only marked Williams' first major success, but also established him as a noteworthy American dramatist of all times.

## 2. Discussion

The Glass Menagerie is a play that is rich in diverse techniques which created a novel theatre experience not only to American theatre but to the world theatre as a whole. The techniques, William's experimented with the similar kind of potential techniques of Arthur Miller, brought American theatre to a new level in mid twentieth century.

### 2.1 Expressionism

In the production notes, Tennessee Williams states that "Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to the truth". Expressionist theatre portrays strong emotions with the dramatization of spiritual awakening and psychological suffering of the characters. Its main concern is to express the vision and realities of mind, emotion and dream that lay within themselves. Expressionism conveys the inability of modern society in satisfying spiritual needs of people, and thereby the modern urban social set up brings in dehumanization that creates immense psychological suffering which people can hardly bare. An expressionist play is a mind-reading and thought-reading play where inner souls of characters are exposed more than physical and verbal behaviour. Although physical pain is perhaps short-lived and could be treated relatively easy, the psychological pain is, in most cases, long-lasting.

"The Glass Menagerie" does not fall into the category of realistic plays, but to the expressionist category because it elaborates psychological realism. All three main characters in "The Glass Menagerie" are the victims of psychological sufferings due to common factors as well as reasons specific to themselves. Amada psychologically suffers due to various reasons such as family obligations, her husband's abandonment, economic pressure, Tom's behaviour and Laura's reclusive nature.

As far as Tom is concerned, his mother over controls his life; it may be her pressure that she passes on to Tom. Amanda instructs Tom how to eat, "And chew..chew..chew. Human beings are supposed to chew their food they before

*they swallow it down,"*(Scene i )how to comb his hair (like his further did), how to dress, and not to go to movies too often, not to smoke, and not to drink. For Tom, his home is like a school. Once he ironically inquires Amanda, "*is there any particular place you want me to sit?"*(Scene v )His job too does not provide with him the emotional freedom he desires, as an artist and as a person who wants to experience adventure. All these create so much of emotional sufferings that reach to a point where he is unable to bare anymore; he leaves home like his father once did.

Due to constant arguments and squabbles between Amanda and Tom, being over worried about her minor physical defect (limping) and suffering from interiority complex (as Jim points out), Laura suffers a lot emotionally which in turn has made her to be very shy, coy, taciturn and a social recluse. Laura could be the worst of the victims of emotional suffering as she has no way to give vent to her feelings unlike Tom and Amanda who express their frustration out in one way the other.

### 2.2 Memory Play

It is Tom's memory which is acted on the stage as he goes down in his memory lane, highlighting what remembers most, and ignoring what remembers least. Explaining "the memory play", Williams notes that "Certain elements of everyday life are omitted entirely, others are minimized, and still others are exaggerated. It is series of events presented not as they actually took place, but as they might be remembered."

The play is autobiographical: it is Tennessee Williams' experiences that he shows on the stage. Memory could be hurting however, nobody can easily get away from it. In the final soliloquy, Tom says:

*"Perhaps I am walking along a street at night, in some strange city, before I have found companions. I pass the lighted window of a shop where perfume is sold. The window is filled with pieces of colored glass, tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors, like bit of a shattered rainbow, then all at once, my sister touches my shoulder. I turn around and look into her eyes. 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 movies or bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger – anything that can blow your candles out."*(Scene vii )

When "*his sister touches his shoulder*", he looks back at his past, thereby his memory is refreshed. In the first appearance, Tom, as the narrator, explains the technique, "*The play is memory. Being a memory play it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic. In memory everything seems to happen to music*"( Scene I ) . "Memory play" is enhanced by music and lighting, which create a strong effect that brings the play closer to the audience.

### 2.3 Narrative Technique

Tennessee Williams in "The Glass Menagerie" uses one of his main characters, Tom, as the narrator of the play. The role Tom plays as a narrator is not only very useful in conveying the full effect of memory play but also very effective in maintaining the intimacy with the audience.

Tom goes beyond the traditional role of the narrator in setting the scene or narration that is achieved through a chorus of western plays or 'Pothe guru', (the narrator) of classical eastern plays. Tom's narration is very authentic, casual and amiable, "yes I have tricks in my pockets. I have things up my sleeve But I am opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you the truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion." (Scene i)

At the outset of the play, Tom describes the social background of the play. "I turn back time. I reverse it to that quaint period, the thirties, when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in school for the blind, their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes...."(Scene i). Tom also warns the audience, that "I menagerie" and "blue roses" in the play may be highly symbolic. Tom is constantly bothered by the haunting memory of Laura, "Then all at once my sister touches my shoulder" (Scene vii) Accordingly, through Tom, Williams accepts that memory is a powerful weapon which cannot simply be pushed into oblivion.

### 2.4 The screen Device - Images and Titles

"The Glass Menagerie" will not be "The Glass Menagerie" if not for the screen device. Mainly to achieve the full-effect of memory play and expressionism, the screen device included in the original script is a must. In the production notes, Williams says, "the purpose will probably be apparent. It's to give accent to certain values in each scene... aside from this structural value, I think the screen will have a definite emotional appeal, less definable but just as important". He adds, "This device was the use of a screen on which was the projected magic-lantern slides bearing images or titles." "These images and legends, projected from behind were cast on section of wall between the front room and dining room areas, which should be in disguise from the rest when not in use." Unfortunately, most of the productions including the first original Broadway production, and the Sri Lankan Sinhala production titled "Paligu Rana" translated by Henri Jayasena, have done away with the screen device which reinforces the effects of memory play and expressionism.

Theatre could be the most powerful weapon in analyzing physical behavior and actions, and their consequences on people. But in analyzing psych of the people, psychological struggles and their subsequent sufferings, the techniques like screen legends could be extremely effective in multiple ways. E.g. When Laura explains Amanda of her painful experience of going to Business College, the image of a swarm of type-writers reflects not only of Laura's fears but of mechanization and impersonality of modern life.

Williams is very positive that future directors may invent better devices to provide the audience with the message that

he intended to convey. It is a praiseworthy quality of a dramatist with a vision and mission. He grants license for directors to produce his play in their own technological devices, knowing that technology would advance quicker than people think.

These are some examples of the effective use of screen device - the images and titles.

Scene I - The title, "ousont les neiges? (where are the snows of yesterday) a medieval French poem

Scene II- The image of swarm of typewriters

Scene III - The image of Blue Roses.

Image of Gentleman caller, a young man with flowers at the door.

Cover of a glamour magazine.

The title- "You thing I'm in love with continental shoemakers?"

The Glass Menagerie

Scene IV- A pirate ship flying a Jolly Roger

The image of "Glamour Magazine

Scene V- The legend 'Annunciation', religious symbol.

Gentleman caller

Scene VI- "High school hero" that changes to a "clerk"

"A pretty trap" title turns to

"This is my sister: celebrate her with strings"

"Not Jim" - "Terror" - "The opening of a door"

Scene VII - Starts with "A souvenir"

"Suspension of a public service"

(when lights go out)

it changes to

'Ha' (Amanda's reaction when she gets to know that Tom didn't pay the light bill)

"I don't suppose you remember me at all" (When Jim and Laura begin to talk)

Blue Roses (When Jim says Laura is very different from others)

"Souvenir" (When Jim kisses Laura)

"Love" (When Jim says he is in love with Betty)

"Things have a way of turning out so badly" or Image- "Gentleman caller waving good bye gaily" (when Laura offers the unicorn to Jim as a souvenir)

"The sky falls" (When Jim says Amanda that he goes steady with Betty)

"And so a good bye" (Amanda says "go there, go to the moon your selfish dreamer - Tom smashes his glass, Laura screams in fright)

### 2.5 Music and Lighting

Music and Lighting enhance the quality of memory plays. There is a specific musical tune when the glass menagerie is presented. Music is an effective reminder through which

memory is activated, and as Williams says, “it gives emotional emphasis - it is the lightest, most delicate music in the world and perhaps the saddest”. The music of glass menagerie may also suggest the fragility of glass.

Lighting, as Williams says, “is not realistic in keeping with the atmosphere of memory, the stage is dim”; the serenity and calmness that require for memory is maintained through lighting. For instance, as categorically mentioned in the production notes, “in the quarrel scene between Tom and Amanda in which Laura has no active part, the clearest fool of lights is on her figure”. In the supper scene (first scene) too, Williams emphasizes that “the light upon Laura should be distinct from the others”. Williams may expect to give emphasis on Laura’s emotional sufferings that are written on her face which provide the audience with essential elements of expressionist play.

### 3. Conclusion

Tennessee Williams’s autobiographical play ‘The Glass Menagerie’ (1944) marks a very special place in American theatre. The drama could be recognized as one of the first literary works that questioned the American dream. The techniques employed in the play have made it novel and revolutionary; at the time of its production the most of the techniques used by Tennessee Williams in the play were alien to the dramatist of his time. Expressionism which could be treated both as a technique and a theme, memory play and screen device are effectively used in forwarding the social message embedded in the play. The screen device which has not been used by the dramatist who produced the play in different languages and destinations still makes ‘The Glass Menagerie’ a drama with the difference, and it carries the identity of the play. The epic theatre which had been popularized by Bertolt Brecht was then a dominant extended technique in the European theatre at the contemporary time. However, Tom’s narrative of his own life story in the play maintaining intimacy with the audience added some novelty to the theatre; hence the theatrical devices employed in the play including expressionism as a predominant technique doubtlessly mark the play an extremely unique and outstanding as one of the best theatre works, American theatre has ever produced.

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