The Poetics of Memory in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*

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Abstract

Memory is a recurrent motif in the plays of Tennessee Williams. Williams uses memory in almost all of his plays. Hence, the aim of this research is to make an analysis of memory in *The Glass Menagerie*, which is an exemplary study of this motif. All characters are introduced through memory. They feel themselves haunted with the shackles of memory, which casts a shadow on their present situation. In using memory as a means to escape from reality, Williams generates the impression that his human archetypes live under unfavourable conditions whether they are social, political, or economic.

1. Introduction

Memory is, generally speaking, a storehouse of the past reminiscences, experiences, and events. It is rather difficult to imagine that man cannot free himself from the shackles of memory, which overlooks the lived reality. Much has been said and written on the role of memory and its significance in man's life. The controversy regarding memory still continues in the field of literary theory especially in phenomenology. A
A cursory look at English literature would give the impression that the subject of memory is a recurrent motif in poetry, drama, novel and other types of writing. By way of illustration, S. T. Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* are good archetypes of approaching the concept of memory in literature.

Prior to any discussion of memory, it is superfluous to scan over the meaning of phenomenology. It studies "...intentional acts as grounded in transcendental subjectivity; and its concern is with a total reconstruction of consciousness..." ¹ It is the consciousness of some thing that forms the core of phenomenology,² as Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, indicates. Clearly, consciousness is instrumental in the field of memory, for memory always embraces a consciousness of some event or thing in the past whose distinctive marks can be seen in the present.

Memory is a brain-related process that includes the idea of retaining information and restructuring past experiences in a newly different way.³ It is any gesture, ritualized or not, whose end is to recover, in the name of a collectivity, some being or event either anterior in time or outside time in order to fecundate, animate, or make a meaningful moment in the present.⁴

In this way, memory of the past cannot be dislocated from the current state of affairs, since man moves in the orbit of the never-ending cycle of time.

In his study of memory, Andreas Huyssen gives a succinct account of how the past and the present are related to each other. As a general rule, memory is juxtaposed with the present; yet, it also has much to do with the dim past. His account of this relatedness runs as follows:

*The temporal status of any act of memory is always the present [...] even though all memory in some ineradicable sense is dependent on some past event or experience. It is this tenuous fissure between past and present that constitutes memory, making it powerfully alive and different from the archive or any other systems of storage and retrieval.*⁵

It is interesting to observe here that memory has many ramifications and types. There exist certain varieties of memory such as propositional memory, habit memory, declarative memory, episodic or recollective memory.⁶ The last type of memory is the cornerstone of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. Hence, episodic memory needs some explanation, because it is the dominant type that colours the action of Williams's famous play. Such memory is defined by the psychologist
William Brewer as "a reliving of the individuals' phenomenal experience from a specific moment in their past." Also, Christoph Hoerl states that episodic memories are those of events and situations that happen in man's life.

Briefly, memory is a record of past incidents. Yet, it borders on the present in one way or another. It is sometimes a powerful influx of what is worth recalling and unforgetting. At other times, memory disturbs and confuses one's temper, for it brings with it the painful memories of the past man has once lived. Such unwelcome memories force themselves upon the present, and heavy efforts are spent to stop remembering these experiences.

2. The Poetics of Memory in The Glass Menagerie

Of Tennessee Williams's plays, The Glass Menagerie seems to be the most famous dramatic creation. It examines the idea of social disintegration in American society. The Wingfield family creates for themselves a world of illusion with a view to avoiding the despicable reality of their life. This fusion of illusion and reality is illustrative of their shaky psychological equilibrium. This holds true for Amanda, Tom's mother, Laura, her crippled daughter, and the narrator Tom. Since past and present are encoded in illusion and reality, memory stands at the forefront of Williams's thematic approaches. His plays are branded as studies in the technique of memory; they are fashioned after a particular model. Judith Thompson mentions that Williams's memory plays take the following structure:

...a recounted memory in the first half of his plays causes "arrest of time", in which a character is frozen in the act of looking back and the characters are static, rendered abnormal, neurotic or otherwise disturbed. In the second half of the play, the memory recounted in the first half is reenacted; for example Amanda's story is reenacted by Laura and Jim, and the memory of Mr. Wingfield's abandonment of the family is reenacted by Tom.

Tom undertakes the task of telling what happened in time out of reach. In most cases, he opens the scenes of the play with the background of the event to come. Furthermore, reenactment means repetition. Certain past events repeat themselves in the present. As the foregoing quotation indicates, Tom's obdurate decision to leave his mother and sister is a simulacrum of his father's abandonment of his family, totally oblivious to their basic necessities.
Consistent with Williams's typical architecture of memory is the use of some theatrical devices such as the legends projected on a screen, music and lighting. These devices aim at creating the required atmosphere of memory. In his production notes of *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams emphasizes the importance of the screen and music, saying that they are introduced in order to involve the audience emotionally in the dramatic action. He also adds that the lighting, which is not realistic, serves the functions of memory. Some times a character may be lit to focus on a posture he or she takes. Or it is associated with a particular psychological state. For instance, a spot of light is shed on Laura's posture on the sofa, which indicates her spiritual degeneration.

Williams himself was considerably interested in the past; therefore, he interpolated autobiographical elements into the structure of *The Glass Menagerie*. He believed that the past is inaccessible in the sense that it cannot be recuperated, however hard man tries. Besides past, the future is rather gloomy and worse than expected. Such interest in past and future is shown accompanied with memory. The use of memory gives much space to explain Williams's past-future equation. Needless to say, the present is also a pivotal issue in the association of memorable ideas. In *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams pins down the significance of the functional role of memory. Memory is part and parcel of the human identity. The human beings are possessed by the traces of memory and they cannot cut themselves off from the recollective dimension of past events.

In the inaugural speech of *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom sets forth the framework within which the play is put. It revolves around the Wingfields' incapability to conform themselves to the normal course of life. The action of the play is, for the most part, narrated through memory. Tom addresses the audience in this way:

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. That explains the fiddle in the wings.
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.  

The narrator Tom clearly furnishes the audience with the key things to digest the content of the play. Memory is encapsulated in the character of Tom who unmaskes important facts about his family. The members of this family live on the memories of the past, memories that mirror their social and psychological sides. More to the point, Tom presents his
memories in a subjective manner. He is totally captivated by the memory of his past, for he always recounts the others' experiences in connection to his.

From the outset of the play, Tom and Amanda show themselves to have a different perspective of life. Tom spends most of his time seeking new adventures, not to mention his addiction to drinking. His mother often complains that he inherited this personal trait from his father, who did not leave his family but his own picture. Such a way of forgetting and self-erasure underscores "the production of a self that is represented...as a crisis of identity." Actually, the incongruous nature of Tom's behaviour broadens the gap that sets him apart from his mother. Amanda in turn adopts a strategy different from Tom's. She is of the opinion that life commands incomparable seriousness to face its ups and downs with undauntedness and fortitude.

The crux of the matter is that Amanda tirelessly attempts to change the life of her children for the better. Amanda's memory of her failure with Mr. Wingfield constitutes the prime mover of her determination to make her children shirk the path of failure she has once trodden. For them she wants a resounding success. Amanda's parochial mentality precludes this wish from being fulfilled in that she aspires to force certain options on her children. She greatly attaches to the echo of her memory when she was young. Tellingly, she reveals this wish to Tom:

AMANDA: The only way to find out about those things is to make discrete inquiries at the proper moment. When I was a girl in Blue Mountain and it was suspected that a young man drank, the girl whose attentions he had been receiving, if any girl was, would sometimes speak to the minister of his church, or rather her father would if her father was living, and sort of feel him out on the young man's character. That is the way such things are discreetly handled to keep a young woman from making tragic mistake!

TOM: Then how did you happen to make a tragic mistake?
AMANDA: That innocent look of your father's had every – One fooled! He smiled – the world was enchanted! No girl can do worse than put herself at the mercy of a handsome appearance!...

Memory lends itself clearly to the present in the above-quoted dialogue. Amanda loves Tom and Laura too much, which is symbolic of her maternal affection she bears for them. She has a strong belief that her sons must avoid falling in the same mistake she made when she was deceived by Wingfield's appearance. The problem with Amanda lies in the fact that she forcibly implants in the minds of both Tom and Laura her own illusions in a way as to make them embrace her idealism.
The Poetics of Memory in Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie.

is, in fact, dislodged from the facts on the ground. She feels herself placed in a position that pushes her not to repeat the gross follies of the dim past.

Likewise, Laura lives on the periphery of her remorseful memories. Physically handicapped, she exerts great efforts to compensate this inferiority complex in the hope of finding herself a place in her society. The glass collection in which she is interested confirms her fragile character. She is, like her glass menagerie, susceptible to breaking. As an escape, she shows great interest in this brittle glass collection. Bigsby states that "Laura seeks immunity by withdrawing into the timeless world of the imagined,..."17 Such a social withdrawal is conceived of as an outlet for her growing frustration, a frustration that is primarily caused by her physical deformity. Her situation is rather exacerbated by the Wingfields' excessive care of her. Amanda always thinks it advisable to marry off her daughter to a gentleman caller, because Laura has become nubile. Also, Tom mentions that "she lives in a world of her own- a world- little glass ornaments/she plays old phonograph records and- that's about all" (271-2). This is the way followed by Laura to lessen her sense of excruciating suffering. Doubtless, the symbol of the glass menagerie owned by Laura is not confined to Laura only, but it also extends to include Amanda and Tom. This personal invulnerability is all-inclusive characteristic in that it pervades the texture of the whole play.

The idea of getting a gentleman caller is like a demon that possesses Amanda's mind. Tom accurately describes his mother as "a woman of action as well as words. / she begins to take logical steps in the planned direction" (sc3.248). The legend entitled "plans and provisions" underscores Amanda's social preparedness for receiving the expected gentleman caller. These plans and provisions are a means for hunting a suitable partner for her single daughter. On Amanda's advice, Laura rethinks of getting married after she had abandoned the obsession that she is unfit for marriage.

Upon the news of Jim O'Connor's imminent arrival at the Wingfield's house, Amanda, Tom, and Laura are making different preparations to receive the hoped-for gentleman caller, who is seen "as a symbol, he is the long-delayed but always expected something we live for,"(236), as Tom states in his opening speech of The Glass Menagerie. They must rise to this happy occasion, the occasion of marrying off Laura to Jim. Amanda, the ringmaster of this marriage, informs Tom that he has to be ready; he must not drink any longer and not to go the movies. She abjures him to amend his unacceptable behaviour, "Try and you will SUCCEED", and Tom promises her to have a sense of responsibility from now on, "I will never be drunkard, Mother" (sc. 4. 258). Certainly, Tom's addiction to drinking and movies is a clear pointer to his indulgence in the world of oblivion. His self-forgetting expresses itself as a way to escape the bitter reality he faces. He does not want to remember his bad conditions, thereby attempting to forget what spoils the present moment. It would
seem that Amanda and her children are totally captured by the echo of memory. Their past failure accompanies their current situation in a manner that complicates and deepens their suffering. Memory for them can be viewed as "a crippling force that prevents them from finding happiness in the present or the offerings of the future."18

Amanda and Tom are engaged in a much-heated discussion about the future of the family, especially the future of the crippled Laura. Their concern over the project of marrying off Laura is strongly felt in the following dialogue:

TOM: I thought perhaps you wished for a gentleman caller.
AMANDA: Why do you say that?
TOM: Don't you remember asking me to fetch one?
AMANDA: I remember suggesting that it would be nice for sister if you bought home some nice young man from the warehouse. I think that I've made that suggestion more than once.
TOM: Yes, you have made it repeatedly. (sc.5 .266)

In the following evening, as Tom remembers, he brought Jim home to meet Amanda and Laura. Jim is set in total contradiction to Tom. He represents the title of success and morality. More important than this, he has a job to get his source of sustenance. In the high school with Tom, he had a magnetic personality. Gradually, his attitude towards Tom radically affected the others, "their hostility wore off and they also began to smile at me as people smile at an oddly fashioned dog who trots across their path at some distance."(273-4). Jim is a vocation from Laura's arcane past life, which remains unknown to Amanda and Tom. The coming of this character arouses her memory when she had a love relationship with him. He is the gentleman caller whom Amanda sees to the prince charming for her ailing daughter. For the purpose of pushing Laura to accept Jim's prospective proposal of marriage, Amanda sets her memory in motion. She presents to Laura the dress she had on when she received her gentlemen callers and met Mr. Wingfield.

Scene six displays the Wingfields' failure in achieving their dream of getting Laura married to Jim. Laura is used as a mousetrap to catch Jim. Amanda is now placed in a hard situation, telling Laura her design. She tells her daughter what upsets her mind:

AMANDA: Now take a look at yourself.
No, wait! Wait just moment- I have an idea!
LAURA: What is it now?
[AMANDA produces two powder puffs which she wraps in handkerchiefs and stuffs in LAURA's bosom.]
LAURA: Mother, what are you doing?
AMANDA: They call them 'Gay Deceivers'!

…………………………………

LAURA: You make it [Laura's chest] seem like we were setting a trap.
AMANDA: All pretty girls are a trap, a pretty trap, and men expect them to be! (sc. 6. 275)

Amanda strongly believes in the importance of conspiracy theory and its fruitful results. She is actuated by the idea that physical attractiveness can bring a husband for her handicapped daughter. With this end in mind, Amanda always exhorts Laura to follow her advice to the letter, because she does not want Laura to repeat the mistakes she made in the past.

Whenever Amanda confronts a difficulty, she remembers her own previous experiences to forget her present suffering. She never forgets her life with her late husband and the days she spent in the South. Occasionally, she moves from one memory to another, thus attempting to profoundly affect the orientation adopted by her children. She tells Laura how she herself behaved when she was a very attractive girl. She gives her daughter a dress which is associated with her old memories. “I wore it on Sundays for my gentlemen callers! I had it on the day I met your father-"(sc.6.276). A little later, Amanda stops in front of Mr. Wingfield’s picture. Meanwhile, music comes in connection to comment on her feelings “And I – [she stops in front of the picture. MUSIC] met your father!” It is worth mentioning here that the picture of the departed Wingfield, the story of the gentlemen callers, and the myth of the South are all- important memorabilia in the Wingfields' view. They obviously represent the never- forgetting history of the family, thereby arousing their past personal experiences. Assuredly, the dramatic purpose behind mentioning these things from time to time is to lay a particular emphasis on the fact that memory works itself out effectively in The Glass Menagerie.

To Laura’s utter astonishment, Jim is the person whom she met in the high school. Their recent meeting sheds light on her secret life, which remained untold to her family. Jim in turn judges her “to be an old-fashioned type of girl.” According to Jim, this reactionary way of life is not suitable for a girl like Laura who is much occupied with her glass menagerie. Among the animals in this collection is the unicorn, an extinct animal, which stands for Laura’s fragile character. Jim ironically says “unicorns, aren’t they extinct in the modern world?” (sc.7. 301). The object of this ironic question is Laura’s living in a ramshackle world. In exchange of views with Laura, Jim spares no efforts to encourage her to forget her physical defect and to be a social organism. What exacerbates things for Laura is that her flickering hope of marrying Jim is devastated by Jim’s pending marriage to one of his acquaintances. Amanda cannot stand the idea that Jim flew away from her trap “Our gentleman caller was engaged to be married! Tom!”, and She rebukes Tom for not knowing Jim’s engagement.

Just as Tom opens The Glass Menagerie with its thematic, historical, and social backgrounds, so he ends it with memory. Gloating over the
guilt feelings that haunt Tom's memory because of leaving his mother and sister alone, Tom demasks what has disturbed his mind. Notwithstanding, his love for Laura seems to be stronger than his love for mother. This may be conceived of as a final attempt to exonerate himself of the havoc done to his sister. He illustrates this point clearly in the closing of the play where he sadly says:

Then all at once my sister touches my shoulder. I turn around and look into eyes…
Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!

(sc. 7. 313)

Clearly, by now, The Glass Menagerie is an archetypal sample of memory in American drama. It displays the role of memory and its impact on the character's mode of thought. Almost all characters find it as a shelter from the pressures of life. To focus on the point that man cannot be separated from the echoes of the past, Williams adroitly weaves memory in the texture of the story of the Wingfields' family. This family is obsessed with the idea that memory gives them an effective but temporary escape from reality.

3. Conclusion

The use of memory as a dramatic means to show the agonizing conditions that surrounded the American society during the Great Depression takes a very peculiar space in American drama of that period. Tennessee Williams is one of the pioneers who inserted memory into the structure of their plays. The greatest of all his plays is, of course, The Glass Menagerie, a play that poses the question of the disintegration of the American individual. Through memory, Williams delves into the psychological construction of his characters.

In all cases, memory seems to play a very pivotal role in characters’ life. It has a clearly tremendous impact on their virtual actuality as well as on their future projects. Amanda, Tom and Laura present their memories in manner that gives rise to the personal mould in which each of them is poured. Amanda has an irresistible craving for changing the course of the life she and her children lead. Nevertheless, she is at a great loss to achieve this aim. Tom in turn is not expert at life if compared with his mother. He has always recourse to retell his experiences and those of his family in an overall context of a personally innovated world. Touching Laura, she is unable to handle what is social, since she is involved in a fruitless pursuit of self-identity. She is all- perfect personification of the idea of disintegration in the play.

Williams employs memory in order to show widely different ideas about some slices of life. His autobiography is strongly reflected in the
memories of his dramatic characters. In addition, the political and economic backgrounds set the stage for Williams's interpolation of memory in the architecture of his masterpiece, *The Glass Menagerie*.

Notes


2) Detweiler, p.9.


7) Sutton, p.4.

8) Sutton, p.5.


10) Williams believes that these theatrical devices are not conventional, a matter that can be looked upon as an unprecedented invention of what he calls "plastic theatre". They play greater role in presenting memory than traditional devices. For more details, see Williams' production notes of *The Glass Menagerie*, pp. 229- 231.


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16) Abbotson, p. 86.
17) Bigsby, p.40.

Works Cited