

Coping Despair with Creativity in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*

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Abstract

Life in Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie is chaotic but the protagonists try to seek order in chaos with their creative force. Such a force provides psychological equilibrium during the intense moments of their existence. Tom, narrator – actor in the play, is faced with the most critical crises of his life but he enacts and reenacts them in such a masterful manner that his life story turns into a piece of art. Guilty conscience pricks Tom but it is his art that provides him much needed cathartic and therapeutic effect to come to terms with agonizing guilt. It is because of his sensitive poetic nature that Tom creates a thing of beauty by changing and transforming the unpleasant events of his life. His mother, Amanda, also pours out all her creative faculties to sustain her lonely life. His sister, Laura, is broken from within but her glass collection of extinct animal in itself reflects plain artistic/aesthetic taste. Reality is bitter and uncontrollable but they try to have a hold over it with their imaginative power. They are trapped in the dark world of pain and anxiety and try to find some light at the end of tunnel with their artistic creation. It is due to their creative ability with which they turn the negative aspects of their life into something bearable. The buffets of life are too heavy for them but they make their life enduring and create meanings with their creativity.

Keywords: *Despair, chaos, crises, order, art, equilibrium, existence*

1. Introduction

The most appealing quality of Tennessee Williams' protagonists is that they are capable of transforming their present chaotic situation with the power of their art because, as Falice in *Outcry* says, magic is habit of their existence and that if they are not artists, they are nothing. They remain dissatisfied with their present and keep on pursuing what ought to be. It is because of such a trait that they seek survival and redemption in the art of creativity. They are artist by nature and try to combat the brutalities of life with the infinite possibilities of their creative imagination. They are sensitive romantics with peculiar strength of mind but they are entrapped in a world where rationality combined with materialism rules the roost. Sometime they behave in such a way that their life becomes a piece of art. Some of them, like Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, recollect and remold certain elements of their lives and turn them into a piece of art. Tom is a lonely figure and deserted by everybody but he draws a play from his bleak life history. His mother, Amanda, also creates a romantic world of Blue Mountain and seventeen

gentleman callers when no gentleman caller is left for her. His sister Laura is the most pathetic figure but she also creates her own menagerie to sustain herself. Tennessee Williams makes it very clear that it is a creative force that ensures our existence: "I think back of existence there has to be a creative force. Otherwise, there could be no existence. Something has to have created existence." (Rasky, 2000, p. 28).

2. Discussion and Analysis

Tom's life story in the form of a play can be regarded as the camouflaged manifestation of his latent wishes. It helps him maintain a psychological equilibrium in the most traumatic moments of his life. His predicament can be well understood with Freud's dream theory which gives the idea that dreams are basically a vehicle for venting tensions, conflicts, and wishes from the unconscious. They help in maintaining psychological equilibrium by providing a partial means for discharging unconscious impulses. Dreams are outlets for tensions that accumulate specifically in the unconscious. Freud finds similarity between dream and artistic activity when he says that "Both involve unconscious wish fantasies that, in more or less recognizable form, achieved conscious and manifest expression" (Olsen & Koppe 1988, p. 202). Tom's imaginative art, like dreams, serves him a safety valve to control the most turbulent excitation in the unconscious. He always feels uncomfortable with the real world and it is the world of art that gives him escape from such a world. He searches for the self and the soul in his art because he considers art as the main catalyst for the resolution of his predicaments.

Most of Williams' artists unleash their inventive genius by thinking backwards, and such an activity provides an outlet for their disturbed lives. In this way they succeed in overcoming the negative thoughts and emotions that are associated with depression. Tom, for example, enacts and reenacts his past life in such a way that his life long story turns into a piece of art. He pours out his experiences of life in such a masterful manner that we start identifying with him. He seeks power in the weakest moments of his life with the power of imagination as Jan Blommaert comments that creative art is empowering and that it provides people with the opportunity to produce a lasting, consequential, thoughtful discourse artifact (Blommaert 2005, p.96). With the help of such an activity Williams' protagonists seek "psychic self-regulation" (Mattoon, 1981, p. 225) by probing their inner world and theatricalizing it with the power of imagination. They are Romantics and try to look within themselves. It is their deep desire to give spontaneous vent to their inner self. Their turbulent soul finds soothing solace in the magic world created by their imagination. Like their creator, they are escapists and create an imaginary world as a refuge because they are unable to adjust themselves to the brute and hostile realities of life. The actions and reactions of these imaginary figures many times help us understand the unchanging truths of life, giving us an opportunity to explore our own selves.

Life in *The Glass Menagerie* is so stifling that bare living becomes a big burden but the inhabitants try to sustain such a life with the power of creativity. Tom flies away in pursuit of his dreams of liberation from the stifling conditions. The whole plot revolves around the past memories of the romantic and artistic person of Tom. He tries to deal with his present crisis by resorting to the power of imagination. It is with this power that he succeeds in turning the ugliest aspects of his life into something palatable. He resorts to storytelling which reveals productive and meaningful development in Tom's identity from an essentially careless, comic, non-serious and casual person to a guilt ridden and imaginative poet troubled by his conscience for acting selfishly in deserting the family in dire predicament. He deserts his sister in the most critical moments of their life but remains faithful to the memories of his sister till the last moments of his life. Seeing his ambiguous attitude towards Laura, some critics observe that he is physically attracted towards his sister that is why John Strother Clayton notes: "Brother-sister incest themes run throughout Williams' work" (Clayton 1971, p.110). Many a moment Tom feels lonely but seeks refuge in the past memories of his sister. What makes Tom's life sustainable is his ability to turn these memories into a piece of art. Peggy Prenshaw comments on the therapeutic effect of art on Tom Wingfield:

Viewing art as extension of the artist, either for what he is or what he needs, leads solipsistically back to the mortal and flawed being that the artist seeks to transcend.... Tom Wingfield casts a magical web over experience, transforming the ordinary and ugly and even painful, into a thing of beauty. But undermining ... [his] transformations of life into art is his [and his creator's] lurking doubt that the vision is wholly truthful. (Prenshaw 1977, p. 24)

Apart from showing art in decadence and/or means of personality derangement, Williams' creative process serves essential pragmatic functions for his protagonists. It provides Tom, for instance, much needed cathartic and therapeutic effect to come to terms with agonizing guilt. But most significantly, it provides the means to identify personal role in the crises, aggravating the distressing reality and identifying his antithetical personas. The dramatic method employed in the play is that of storytelling. Dramatic art in terms of staged production /performance embodies a whole set of values, conventions, systems and structures that set it apart from such literary genre as fiction and poetry. Unperformed dramatic texts, however, overlap with literary genera like fiction and epic poetry (Neeland & Dobson 2000, p. 27). Action or acting/ performance on the stage are very essential prerequisite of the performed dramatic text. Here drama "creatively simulates, enacts and re-enacts events that have, or may be imagined to have happened in the real imagined world" (Neeland and Dobson 2000, p.2). Modern development in theory has, however, shifted the focus on action to dramatization of mental states and "structures of mind" (Pizzato 1998, p. 5). Expressionist theatre specifically focuses on this paradigm shift from focus on environment as upheld by naturalists to psychological conditions and states.

It has done away with the conventions of plot, story and linear movement of the story towards some predictable, determinable pattern of conclusion or settlement of the problems/issues. But regardless of the shift towards dramatizing mind/structures of mind, action on the stage remains determinate part of dramaturgy. Williams creatively carves out an unconventional story telling method, generally associated with fiction with a purpose to find therapeutic outlet for the distressing and long standing guilt. This use of storytelling is in fact a subversion of dramatic convention to achieve possible therapeutic effect. Story telling reveals a perpetual compulsion on the protagonist's part to speak out personal selfish act of deserting family in the hour of crises. The story is told retrospectively that transforms him into narrator-actor in the play. This something related to past compels him to repeat it and speak it out. The speaking could be regarded as a form of confession of one's role in family crises and losses. Here he could be associated with Loman's self talking in *Death of a Salesman* (Ribkoff 2000, p.50), Dimmesdale in Hawthorn's *The Scarlet Letter* (Pimple 1993, p.260) whose guilt of having adulterous relation with Hester drives him to market place at night.

The story telling also becomes a means of bringing up the protagonist's personal role in familial crises and searching personal identity. As the curtain rises, the Wingfield are found plagued and overwhelmed by powerful socio-psychological factors. The very first speech of Tom - who is "A poet with a job in a warehouse"² and who resides in the "enslaved section of American society" (*Menagerie*, p.233) - establishes the societal pressures in the form of joblessness, creating widespread unrest and deep sense of social insecurity (Bigsby 1997, pp. 29-32). All fears, dreams and illusion of the Wingfield family are related to this societal factor. Amanda's worries surrounding Laura's education, training and marriage spring from deep social insecurity. Tom's retrospective narration of the problem, however, brings out his own greater role in accentuating family crises. Being the solitary bread winner of the family in this time of crises, his unequivocal dissatisfaction from the job in the warehouse and dreams of moving away from the stifling conditions brings him into open confrontation with the mother and becomes the second major cause of crises in the family. For instance Amanda is irked by Tom's casual approach to his job in the warehouse. A bitter exchange of words builds up between the mother and the son on his going to movies, staying out till late at night at the cost of efficiency in the job:

"Nobody goes to the movies night after night. Nobody in their right minds goes to the movies as often as you pretend to...and movies don't let out till two a.m. Come in stumbling. Muttering to yourself like a maniac! You get three hours'

² Williams, Tennessee. (1976). *Tennessee Williams' Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and Other Plays*. London: Penguin. P. 228. All the subsequent references of *Menagerie* quoted in this study have been taken from this text.

sleep and then go on work. Oh, I can picture the way you are doing down there. Moping, doping, because you're in no condition". (*Menagerie*, p. 251).

This fervent disparagement is followed by her pathetic expression, "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_" (*Menagerie*, p. 251). Amanda's frustration increases manifold after Laura shows least awareness and capability to take practical steps for realization of stable/independent living. Particularly after Business College fiasco, Amanda becomes deeply concerned about the future of her daughter. Under these circumstances it becomes natural for a compassionate and considerate mother to seek a suitable match for her hypersensitive daughter. The gentleman caller, in fact, becomes Amanda's obsession, and Tom recalls that:

Like some archetype of the universal unconscious, the image of gentleman caller haunted our small apartment...an evening at home rarely passed without some allusion to his image, this specter, this hope.... Even when he was not mentioned, his presence hung in mother's preoccupied look... (*Menagerie*, p. 248).

Then story telling also reveals productive and meaningful development in Tom's identity from an essentially careless, comic, non-serious and casual person to a guilt ridden and imaginative poet troubled by his conscience for acting selfishly in deserting the family in dire predicament. At the start of the play, he appears in a very casual and playful mood of comically providing some hints from here and there; addressing the audience in a playful manner, "Yes, I have tricks in my pocket. I have things up my sleeves. 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 pleasant disguise of illusion" (*Menagerie*, p. 234). The funniest part of his introductory speech is related to his introduction of father:

There is a fifth character in the play who does not appear except in this larger than life photograph over the mantel. This is our father who left us a long time ago. He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances; he gave up the job with the telephone company and skipped the light fantastic out of the town...the last we heard of him was a picture post card...containing a message of two words: 'hello_ Goodbye'! and no address (*Menagerie*, p. 234).

In scene iii, Tom's whole attitude is reflective of a crazy and foolish being lacking in seriousness, maturity to understand mother's anxiety regarding his own career and Laura's future or help her come out of this particular state and settle the perplexing and distressing issues at home. He picks up quarrel with Amanda on what is his routine habit of acting non-seriously in all matters relating to his job, watching movies, and staying out of home for the major part of night daily. In response to Amanda's call that she does not believe that he goes to the movies every night, Tom appears at the height of his folly, idiocy and craziness:

I'm going to opium den! Yes, opium dens, dens of vice and criminal hangouts, mother. I've joined the Hogan Gang, I'm a hired assassin, I carry a Tomy gun in a violin case! I run a string of cat houses in the valley! They call me killer, killer, killer Wingfield; I'm leading a double life, a simple, honest warehouse worker by day, by night a dynamic czar of the underworld, Mother (*Menagerie*, p. 252).

Tom's casual, careless and comic nature is also apparent in the very manner of arranging a gentleman caller for his sister. Initially he does not try to understand mother's sensitivity to the gentleman caller issue at home. He avoids having any concern with the problem, but later on very selfishly agrees to arrange one for the sister. But to the surprise of his mother, he suddenly announces they are going to have one. The visit of the caller further reveals the careless and insensitive approach to the issue. It, in fact, creates intensely distressing and discomfiting situation for the women as he steadily discloses his engagement and marriage in the near future. Tom knowingly ignores the fact that his sister Laura and Jim (Gentleman caller) were familiar with each other in the school days and that they are poles apart in personalities and deportment. He does not even try to take Jim into confidence regarding the purpose of invitation to his home or probe Jim's personal association and future plans despite the fact they are close friends in the warehouse. But once he acts selfishly in deserting the family, Tom is able to reveal his deeply sensitive, imaginative poetic nature. This is how guilt as malaise affects his life and thought processes:

I travelled around a great deal. The cities swept about me like dead leaves, leaves that were brightly colored but torn away from the branches. I would have stopped, but I was pursued by some thing. It always came upon me unawares, taking me altogether by surprise. Perhaps it was a familiar bit of music. Perhaps it was only a piece of transparent glass. Perhaps I'm 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, fine transparent bottles in delicate colors, like bits of shattered rainbow. Then all at once my sister touches my shoulder. I turned around and look into her eyes. Oh Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but 'm more faithful than I intended to be! I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I turn into movies or bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger - anything that can blow your candles out! (*Menagerie*, p. 295).

Each word and expression in this final soliloquy speaks of a sensitive and poetic temperament plagued by his memories and guilt that springs from cutting of human relationship in pursuit of selfish interest and dreaming. This speech establishes his final impression on the readers and audience as a person with deeply sensitive poetic nature. He leaves his family for the sake of self realization, but fails to escape the nostalgic attachment with his sister in particular and other members of the family. Even his irritating and interfering mother and cruelly indifferent father keep on haunting him. He shuns stagnancy

to bring some change in life, but it results in further stagnancy and loneliness. The only consolation left in such a life is his memory of the moments spent with the members of the family. Whenever the feelings of lonesomeness surround him, he tries to enact his life history through his art of story telling. Such is the intensity of attachment that it gives shape to a great piece of art. Like his creator, Tom creates a thing of beauty by changing and transforming the unpleasant events of his life.

When Amanda's husband leaves her for good, she finds herself straitjacketed by the unpalatable circumstances. She has been dreaming of marrying a gentleman caller "who had the Midas touch" (*Menagerie*, p.239) but the Midas turns into dross with his unfaithfulness. She tries to dignify her miserable life by inventing seventeen gentleman callers with the conviction that "sometime they come when they are least expected" (*Menagerie*, p.237). Her reaction to her wretched situation looks girlish but she is never ready to be controlled by her circumstances. She "puts up a solitary battle" (*Menagerie*, p.258) even after her husband has deserted her in an abject poverty. She may invent her dreamland of "Seventeen gentlemen callers," (*Menagerie*, p. 237) "Blue Mountain" (*Menagerie*, p. 240) and "jonquils" (*Menagerie*, p. 276) but she is realistic about the future of her children. She arranges money to get Laura admitted to Rubicam Business College so that Laura could stand on her own legs. Her pragmatism demands to get her daughter married off as soon as possible. "She desperately sets herself to marry Laura off, partly out of a genuine concern and partly because Laura is a responsibility of which she wishes to rid herself. She thus evidences a strange and affecting blend of pity and cruelty" (Bigsby 1984, p. 40). She flatters Tom to bring a gentleman caller for Laura and performs gallantly and compels Laura to receive the gentleman caller. She pours out all her creative faculties to make Laura a pretty trap for the expected gentleman caller.

Laura's world of glass menagerie also corresponds to associating art with a regressive, disturbed, depressed and psychologically ruined personality of Laura. Her glass collection of extinct animal in itself reflects plain artistic/aesthetic taste. But the contextual implications and the symbolic meanings attached to this collection presents a depressing account of human personality, its absolute regression and tendency to abandon reality for the sake of existence in mythical world/ world of unreality/fantasy, "immune from the onward rush of twentieth century" (Bigsby 1997, p. 38). Laura is terribly shy, complex ridden, emotionally as well as physically fragile, incapable of withstanding slight variation in climate and surroundings. She is introduced as a young lady in the worst temperamental/psychic conditions. She is crippled from childhood illness, shy and fragile like piece of her own glass collection. A little variation in situation, climate and environment make her terribly sick. She could not complete her education due to this temperamental and psychological flaw. Later on she drops her typing course for the same reasons. Her attitude as long-awaited gentleman caller visits them is another instance of her terrible worn out

and fragile nature. Importantly it reveals her inability to face reality in the form of gentleman caller who exhibits greater level of confidence, power of speaking/communication and possible challenge to her alienated world of fantasy/unreality. This association with glass menagerie and existence in the world of fantasy incapacitates her further to face reality, establish any sort of meaningful relation within the family and outside the family and leaves her socially and emotionally paralyzed. The gentleman caller enters her world of menagerie, breaks her unicorn and makes it less freakish. She gives this piece of her art to him as a souvenir which shows that she has transcended the world of menageries.

3. Conclusion

Life in *The Glass Menagerie* is chaotic but the protagonists try their best to create some order out this chaos. They have something to hold on and that something is their sense of creativity even in the face of death and destruction. So, imagination becomes a powerful force in *The Glass Menagerie* and the dimension of fantasy acquires a central role in personal as well as in social life. It is the imaginative ability of Tom, Amanda and Laura which saves them from a complete breakdown. It is the transforming power of creativity with which they are capable of turning the undesirable events of their lives into something desirable. During the lowest moments of their lives, they articulate their inner selves by creating art which serves them as a therapy and bulwark against their expected breakdown. It is therapeutic force of their art which relieves them from the pain of existence. Their tender feelings serve them as a source of inspiration in their moments of creativity. It is this imaginative power which proves therapeutic and helps them seek meanings in their lives and avoid their complete breakdown. Reality is bitter and uncontrollable but they try to have a hold over it with their imaginative power. They are trapped in the dark world of pain and anxiety and they try to find some light at the end of tunnel with their artistic creation. It is due to their creative ability with which they turn the negative aspects of their life into something positive. The buffets of life are too heavy for them but they make their life endurable and create meanings with their creativity. These are the moments when the chains of reality are overstepped by the wings of imagination: the moments when the act of creativity evaporates the border between fiction and reality as Tom dramatizes his life story forgetting whether it is a reality or a drama.

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