



Memory and Modern Drama: Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* as a Case Study

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Abstract— *Tennessee Williams is one of the foremost playwrights in modern drama. In 1945, the American theater witnessed his mind-blowing play, The Glass Menagerie. Because of the latter, Williams received a great deal of fame and winnings. Since The Glass Menagerie is a memory play, this paper will focus on the subject of memory and its interconnectedness with modern drama first, then delve into memory theories, and lastly discuss memory mechanisms in The Glass Menagerie.*

Keywords— *Modern Drama, Memory Play, Memory Studies, The Glass Menagerie, Tennessee Williams.*



I. INTRODUCTION

The matrix of American theater is modern drama, “modern” because it simply occurred during the period of modernity. There is a saying that “modern drama” first appeared with the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. However, Joseph Roach argues that “the modernity of modern drama begins in the eighteenth century rather than with Ibsen.” He continues, “The editorial vision of modern drama continues to evolve in a decades-long conversation about the meaning and value of ‘the drama’ in modernity” (Ackerman 12).

Each discipline in literature has its own era and changes as a result of human development. Greek theater is different from Elizabethan theater, and at this contemporary time, modern theater is different, too. Also, this is because each style, genre, or reform represents its own epoch. Periodization—the division of literary works, cultural history, and theatrical features and forms—was mostly associated with the colorful treats, methods, and approaches being represented at the time. Historical archives are responsible for such division by defining each discipline according to its era, scholars, prominent authors, locations, and so on. This order, as it is the “object of study” to many researchers, could be somewhat

sophisticated regarding lack of methods, theoretical approaches, and most importantly, the segregation of other archives (Knowles 8).

Regarding the aspect of modernity, drama was obliged to follow the vogue of “make it new” and Brecht’s theatrical device, “the alienation effect,” which goes similarly with the formalist’s concept of defamiliarization (Raman 89). Since modern drama first appeared in the 19th century, modernity has been its advocate, with its full wings hovering in the air, high and far from the constraints and traditional conventions of classical drama. Modernity was everywhere and about anything at least considered to matter, and in the field under discussion (drama), it was primarily associated with Europeans and American dramatists.

When the concept of modern drama was established, a contract was signed for suggesting “theatre,” which refers to distinguished dramatic literature distinct from story, novel, or poem, but a dialogue (sometimes a monologue) attempting to connect characters on stage through mutual communication (Knowles 9). A straight plot (Aristotelian) with resolution, which is the crucial element in classical drama, cannot, probably, occur or be straight in modern

drama, which bases most of its features on Nietzsche's nihilism and Camus's absurdism.

Drama is a form of everyday life; the communication and dialogues we engage in on a daily basis can jog our memories and cause us to recall a wide range of activities, incidents, and occurrences. Modern drama, as a result, has a past that is selectively remembered and denied in the institutions that are supported in academia and scholarship. And this is why many playwrights can be dead and forgotten, but today they are resuscitated and remembered when a play is set to be performed by the name of its playwright, or a movie is produced with the name of the dramatist. Thanks to modernization (the penetration of everyday life by new technologies). Despite this, modern drama was excluded from the canon of modernism, and New-Criticism has contributed to this matter. Elin Diamond argues that the new critics' position, which opposes some historical endeavors by questioning their integrity and facts, is appropriate given the concern about history's legitimacy and the fact that much of modernity's writings expose modernity's frequent biases (Ackerman 9).

II. MODERN DRAMA AND MEMORY THEORIES

The rebellion of modernity toward the old traditions of Memory Theater brought on its shoulders profound and complex questions that were observed to be frozen in terms of responding. The modern world and time produce perplexed insights into viewing the past, resulting in a sophisticated view and recollections of traumatized historical events. In light of this, Grotowski argues that the way we remember is not constant but dynamic and changing instead. Richard Terdiman, on the other hand, sees that memory theater is performed in multiple ways, and this occurs in many exemplified plays in which we encounter amnesiac characters (Malkin 4). Therefore, we find no grounded past but a fluctuating past within a collective consciousness as a shelter for fragmented identity.

In postmodernism, theater has shaped a new sight or dogma that functions as a shift in the way we remember things, especially in culture and art, which theater represents and in which it reenacts remembering. Here, we can observe that memory is a progressive aspect of time and place. Ancient memory, for instance, is not parallel to contemporary memory, which is born in a highly progressive time. Simply put, if man progresses, memory too does. The modernists, shocked by the status of the past, are no longer looking for sense or the "natural" found in consciousness or memory, but in their turn count on the fragmented psyche of the deepest character. And this

occurs in Joyce's stream of consciousness and in Freud's psychology. Accordingly, memory for postmodern theater is changed and experienced through new characteristics, in which voices and images are privileged over characters and/or narratives, because for them, the source of remembrance is not psychologically loaded consciously in a character, but the culturally determined subconscious is what is focused on. Therefore, the past evokes the stages of collective memory with paradoxical images and irrational thoughts in spite of the traumatized events experienced by humans (Malkin 4).

2.1 PSYCHOLOGICAL MEMORY

The foundation and development of the Freudian psychological approach were memory problems, most frequently trauma and psyche repression. The latter roots repression in the unconscious mind and creates false memories that aid the conscious in coping with the present since it is psychologically traumatized. Here, memory can be linked to Freud's already unstable past via the construction level in order to figure out how people negotiate their memories. In his book *Memory in Play*, Attilio Favorini claims that Freud emphasizes the hidden impact of the past, in which memories from the depths of the psyche (the unconscious mind) can harm and influence memory formation. Thus, to avoid destruction, memory helps the conscious mind find various mechanisms, so to speak, to lighten the unconscious darkness (Favorini 6).

Subsequently, Favorini indicates that the implication of memories given or provided by self-experience is at the heart of modern psychology. Further, this is also confirmed by David Savran in his book *The Playwright's Voice: American Dramatists on Memory, Writing, and the Politics of Culture*, where, in the middle of his memory-history argument, he sees memory as this: "Memory, on the one hand, is usually understood to be spontaneous, a part of lived experience" (Savran 18). The palace of theater is conceived as autobiographical memory, with which Tennessee Williams was obsessed; "his play, *The Glass Menagerie*, is considered an autobiographical memory play" (Favorini 141). Undoubtedly, memory is adjacent to individualism; even Halbwachs' new theory tackles it from a collective perspective. Despite this, Halbwachs did not totally cut the thread; he still admits that memory has psychological features, yet he only observes it socially, in the behavioral sense of a group, and thus memory becomes collective. In short, memory has a double identity, along with psychic and physical concerns.

2.2 CULTURAL MEMORY

The contemporary scholar of memory studies, Astrid Erll, contends that poetry, drama, fiction, and other literary genres cannot exempt memory aspects. In her book

Memory in Culture, most specifically the part about “memory in literature,” she asserts that the study of literary works, in general, deals with the representation of memory in a synchronic foregrounding and that a dialogical, sincere relation exists between literature and memory discourses. Not to mention the significance of the canon, this deals widely with the diachronic measurement of memory and literature (Erll 77). Her saying posits that literary works, from many angles, are carriers of cultural memory; in other words, they represent a sort of cultural remembering through an observable artistic work—that is, fiction, for instance.

Erll could not agree more that memory plays an important role in literature, on both sides: theme and structure (77). Individual and collective memories, Erll writes, are better amplified functionally in monologues and conscious and unconscious processes of remembering. And this is observed in many novels, plays, and even poems when the poet contemplates some objectionable portion of nature. Assmann's interpretation of the Romantic period suggests this: “With the Romantic period, a literary concept of memory emerges that is no longer primarily dedicated to the storing of knowledge (*ars memoriae*), but instead accentuates forgetting and the construction of individual identity through the selective and constructive reference to the past” (78). Having said that, memory is deeply accessible in drama; in fact, especially modern drama experienced a shift from modernism to post-modernism, and by the latter I refer to Samuel Becket, who is credited with elevating drama from a focus on the body, performance, and staging to a greater emphasis on what's in the “basement” of consciousness and memory (Ackerman 137).

2.3 TRAUMATIC MEMORY

In her book *Hysteria, Trauma, and Melancholy*, Christina Wald claims that theater involves psychoanalysts who meddle with the diagnosis of the psyches of drama characters on stage. Now, according to her, the concept of “trauma” dates to the nineteenth century, when a form of injury (a mind wounded) appeared because of shellshock, that is, the effects of World War I, which left the injured with nothing but a wounded memory. Psychologically, trauma can be defined as “an event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the subject's psychical organization” (93). This means that traumatic memories are the product of psychological damage to the conscious mind caused by childhood wounds. The subconscious is more likely to store traumatic events, which eventually come to light. Here again, memory is key in causing the

subconscious mind to bring up those long-forgotten terrible incidents.

Significantly, the exposition of a specific character's traumatic experience is processed by looking at their behavior, impressions of some concerns, and expressions, which are essentially their subconscious fears revealed. Trauma is diagnosed with multiple mental disorders, one of which is shell shock, now called “post-traumatic stress disorder.” The symptoms of the latter are described as: first, the response to the event is usually fear, dreadfulness, or powerlessness; second, avoiding any association with that trauma; and finally, resisting any recollections of it. However, the former traumatic event can be experienced again in various ways, namely through intrusive memories of the event and nightmares (Wald 94). Therefore, in modern drama, many characters, as traumatized subjects, are likely to hold these symptoms.

Traumatic memory has been debated and concerned not just in psychology but also in cultural circles in both collective and individual forms. Simply, traumatic memories refer to the memories of a traumatic event a person has experienced in the past. These memories are maintained in the past yet revealed by forms of recollections in the present: “the past is continually being re-made in the interests of the present” (98). Moreover, Wald argues, citing the works of Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud, that traumatic memories are distinct from other casual memories in that they are uninfluenced by other life experiences. For instance, Wald assures us that narrative memories tend to be flexible and embrace social traits, so they can be shared in different versions with a particular recipient, while traumatic memory is fixed and lacks social components. Actually, traumatic memories are not influenced by time and cannot be narrated verbally. Thus, the body is a trustworthy element for recording past experiences, especially those that appear to be damaging. Wald quotes Aleida Assmann's notion of *Erinnerungsräume*, which describes traumatic memory as “an experience that is encapsulated in the body but cut off from consciousness” (97).

III. THE GLASS MENAGERIE AS A MEMORY PLAY

Memory play is a literary innovation of the modern era. After the dual horrors of the nineteenth century (World War I and II), the literary sphere started breathing again. The twentieth century then becomes more than just a “century of innovation,” but also a pivotal advocate for memory genres, in which memory has tempted and shaped the subject of modern drama and many theater arts. Seemingly, it was the “isms” movements (modernism and

post-modernism) and the rise of modern psychology that were responsible for intervening with the memory aspect of modern theater. Thus, dramatists find it an indispensable theme for their plays.

The past is a remarkable element in the process of remembering. Really, in the case of memory, remembering must be taken into account for those who are inclined to diagnose the mental position of a memory play character. For the record, Arthur Miller posits that “the memory play is driven by the agenda of the remembering subject” (Favorini 148). As a result, the past is set to destroy the boundaries of now and then while remaining confined to bygone events. However, Favorini claims that the “drama of mnemonic signs” is a type of de-narrative memory in which the controlling narrator is suppressed for the sake of memory’s subversive tendency and spontaneity, as in *The Glass Menagerie*.

By definition, a “memory play” is one in which memory is prominently featured in the drama. Also, it is presented as a way of remembering the past, and forgetting serves as a crucial factor in the self-formation of a particular character. It is in this chapter that the desire to remember or forget is prominently displayed, with or without the help of a remembering narrator. Notably, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams are the literary figures who prominently paved the way for the genre of memory play. With their huge interest in the characteristics of remembering and forgetting, they foreground memories through the narrator’s omniscient view over his fellow characters on stage (Favorini 157). In this regard, our interest will only be focused on Tennessee Williams’s drama, specifically his famous memory play, *The Glass Menagerie*.

3.1 THE CHAOTIC WORLD AND LAURA’S VULNERABILITY

The pre-war world was another home for artists and writers. It appeared secure and stable in the late forties and early fifties, but sadly, depression destroyed this version soon after. This was because of shock, trauma, and the horror of waiting and expecting other dilemmas to show up. If Virginia Woolf had posited that “human nature changed in 1910” (Bigsby 31), then, here, the American autonomous self, morality, and security are definitely hard to sustain. Hence, the self is far from just playing on the ground of social despair but rather is floundering in the hole of shell, shakiness, and fragmentation.

Further, the world seems unreal anymore because of its unbearable realities. If anything were real, then it would only be imaginary in one’s memory. Laura’s glass menagerie is “frozen,” which seems to indicate that time is clogged and stagnant because of the obscure, dark world

she lives in. In an attempt to gather her senses, she is haunted and trapped by a ‘traumatic memory,’ which is chasing her for her life. Laura’s vulnerability in the midst of mysterious modernity allows her to escape the chaotic world and replace it with another—that of myth, imagination, and fantasy, represented by the glass unicorn. In scene 2, Laura’s mother is questioning and pitying her child for just busying her life with the glass unicorn, saying:

“AMANDA [hopelessly fingering the huge pocketbook]: So what are we going to do the rest of our lives? Stay home and watch the parades go by? Amuse ourselves with the glass menagerie, darling?” (*The Glass Menagerie* 69)

Music is a theatrical technique designed primarily for the audience. As a result, the reader will not sympathize with Laura, the most destructive character in William’s play, because the reader will not experience the sad rhythm played on while Laura is dallying with her glass animal. Music in modern theater is crucial; it activates the audience’s emotions and sympathy. Not just that, but it also triggers their memories. Thus, whenever the glass menagerie is mentioned in the play, music occurs.

[... Faintly the music of “The Glass Menagerie” is heard as Amanda continues, lightly.] (*The Glass Menagerie* 63)

[The scene dims out with the “Glass Menagerie” music.] (*The Glass Menagerie* 64)

[Music.]

[Screen legend: “The Glass Menagerie.”] (*The Glass Menagerie* 77)

Currently, we can only think of one thing at this point: how this beautiful lady will cope with the harshness of the world’s menaces and only live with her memory’s visions and fantasies. In fact, beauty cannot hold in the midst of sorrowful reality; it will inevitably die as the glass is broken. This unstable character: would it be blamed for her insanity or the world’s circumstantial difficulties instead? The past is responsible for the present mess. Therefore, the future has no value since the present is sick. Indeed, “modern drama” derives its modernity from the estrangement of the past (Knowles 70). The past is dead, but it lives on in memories—horrifying memories, to be sure—which cause artists to reflect on their predicament and seek a modern change. Tennessee Williams believes that the past cannot and will not be recovered. Actually, the vexed and bloody nature of the past, as it is, is

sustained by cruelty and corruption. Hence, the future is worse: “a passion without tenderness” (Bigsby 32). Eventually, the goal of modern theater reformation was to keep both the future and the past alive; the past is dead but lives on in our memories, while the future is unattainable but predicted to be optimistically good.

3.2 TOM THROUGH THE MEMORY OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Tennessee Williams himself did not survive his contemporary dramatic world. His ironic attempt was characterized as “romantic in an unromantic world,” where beauty is faded, youth is dead, violence is dark, and finally, love is redeemed. He was allured by his fondness for drugs and alcohol, surrounded by visions of self-destruction and hopelessness. His life was nothing more than full of “language and imagination.” He explained his career as a playwright: “Creating imaginary worlds into which I can retreat from the real world because I’ve never made any kind of adjustment to the real world” (Bigsby 33). In an autobiographical sense, as Bigsby inscribes, “There is, indeed, a real sense in which Williams is a product of his work” (4). It could be argued that it is not just his work but his milieu, too, that left his memory deeply wounded, yet it has enabled him to contribute many magnificent plays to American drama.

The world was unjust to Tennessee. It drags people from a stable mentality to being psychopaths, emphasizing the failure of sustained sanity. His characters were indeed pulled towards mental instability; they also seem to be or want to be artists in the middle of destruction. To emancipate themselves, they need to embrace art. Tom, in *The Glass Menagerie*, wants to pursue his career as a poet, yet he admits being surrounded by a family that needs to be fed. Giving up his interest, he found comfort in opium cups, which he concealed from his mother because she was too afraid for her child to end up like his father. The following dialogue is evidence of the analysis given:

AMANDA: Where are you going?

TOM: I’m going to the movies!

AMANDA: I don’t believe that lie!
[Tom crouches toward her, overtopping her tiny figure. She backs away, gasping.]

TOM: I’m going to opium dens!
Yes, opium dens, dens of vice and criminals’ hangouts, Mother. (*The Glass Menagerie* 76)

Language in drama, in particular, can represent and elicit memories and senses of living and cultural forms of the era in which the play was written. Confirming this, Alan

Ackerman says: “Language is, in one certain sense, a kind of living memory, the temporal trace of cultural life” (Ackerman 194). More so, the Lacanian psychological approach sees that “the experience of temporality, human time, past, present, memory, the persistence of personal identity over months and years—this existential or experiential feeling of time itself—is also an effect of language” (72). Thus, the linguistic aspect here shows the way in which we use language (through dialogue or writing) as a medium for transmitting memories to other generations. However, despite this dominant aspect of language, modern drama, especially American drama, is produced through silence, according to C. W. E. Bigsby in his book *Modern American Drama, 1945–2000*. In fact, this is observed much more during stage-theatre performances, which cannot be experienced while reading the play. Evidently, this is undoubtedly factual, as Tennessee Williams claims, “Theatre is meant for seeing and feeling” (Bigsby 2). In Scene four, through Tom’s fragmented language, Laura learns that he spent the whole night drinking, and thus his hearsay is no longer saving him.

TOM [bitterly]: One crack — and it falls through!

[Laura opens the door.]

LAURA: Tom! Tom, what are you doing?

TOM: Looking for a door key.

LAURA: Where have you been all this time?

TOM: I have been to the movies.

LAURA: All this time at the movies?
(*The Glass Menagerie* 78)

The theme of remembering versus forgetting is strongly present here. Tom is trapped by his memories, and when they inflame his past remembering, he blocks them by drinking liquor as a way of forgetting the past, which ruins his present moment. Therefore, in modern drama, characters seek oblivion either through memory, as in Amanda’s preoccupation with her romanticized past, or through alcohol, as in Tom’s case.

3.3 THE IMPACT OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION’S MEMORY ON THE WINGFIELDS

Tennessee Williams was interested in social problems at the start of his career; “my interest is social problems” (Bigsby 33), he says. He was famous for reflecting America’s sociopolitical conflicts and sufferings within society. Theater, for him, made it easier to deliver a message that he believes will have a greater impact on the

American audience. The Great Depression was one of the sociopolitical issues addressed in his play, *The Glass Menagerie*. A “dissolving economy” is how the narrator describes it.

“Their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes, and so they were having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy.” (*The Glass Menagerie* 58)

The play represents the working class in American society in the midst of the 1930s economic crisis. The Wingfield family is an example, as Tom narrates the memories of that American era, saying:

“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* 57)

Amanda is extremely worried about Laura's future. Since Amanda is unable to find Laura a gentleman, Amanda strongly begs Tom to do so. This ostensibly indicates that Amanda only sees a working gentleman's stability as a secure reason for her daughter's future, as she is haunted by the memory of the Great Depression and her doubt that the crisis may happen again. After all, each character in the play, particularly the three central characters, Tom, Amanda, and Laura, seeks emancipation from their own circumstances in order to reach happy days, which are reinforced by their memories and desires for the sake of the ill-fated American Dream.

In brief, despite the social disintegration running through American society, *The Glass Menagerie* was not written to present a social reality of American society; rather, it has to do with the failure of a haunting, which accompanies their current condition in a manner that deepens their struggle. Then I can say that memory is a dreadful shelter for them, keeping them away from a peaceful present and a hopeful future.

3.4 WILLIAMS'S POETICS OF MEMORY IN THE GLASS MENAGERIE

Williams, a former poet, adopted the tendency to “poetize” in his plays because, he claims, it suits emotions. Accordingly, his language device is “less poetic than effusive.” As a new style, different and unique from ancient poetry, it is designed to deceive and draw attention. According to his assessment, it was intended to play the role of reality detachment, a disguise that prevents characters from discovering the truth. It is a hazy style of

using poetic language on stage and in performance in which words can create tension with feeling rather than just hearing. As he observes, “poetry doesn't have to be words” (Bigsby, 34). Thus, memory in the glass menagerie is “nonrealistic, exaggerated, dim, and poetic” (*The Glass Menagerie* 57), because William's plays were never realistic.

The plays of Tennessee Williams are neither realistic nor naturalistic. First, his plays are mostly symbolic and imaginative, rather than depicting obvious reality. It turns out, after all, that Williams has a poetic touch, full of imagination, which is transferred into poetic images performed on stage. Secondly, his characters are determined not to produce a physical display of their real human nature. Through their absurdist views of life, they are built into the structure of questioning existence. Therefore, his sensibility was marked by Camus' absurdism. The future for Amanda is puzzling, hopeless, and untrustworthy.

“AMANDA: What are we going to do, what is going to become of us, what is the future?” (*The Glass Menagerie* 66)

“Is that the future that we've mapped out for ourselves? I swear it's the only alternative I can think of! [She pauses.] It isn't a very pleasant alternative, is it? [She pauses again.]” (*The Glass Menagerie* 70)

Tennessee Williams' theatrical characters are doomed by a tragic reality that, ironically, controls their lives through bizarre and banal situations. Thus, it is, as he writes, “less social than a metaphysical reality” (Bigsby 38). Though his absurdist plays are different from those of the father of the “theater of the absurd,” Samuel Beckett, Williams' absurdist style “feels heat even in the cold flame” (38) whereas Beckett's technique has to do with alienation. The first is looking for logic, while the second is preoccupied with sanity. In short, nothing makes sense for them both except for their agreement on memory damage.

IV. CONCLUSION

In sum, memory is a common theme in modern drama. In many plays, playwrights frequently investigate how people and communities remember and forget their past experiences. Characters may struggle to come to terms with memories of traumatic events or actively repress memories to suit their own present wants. The concept of memory can also be found in plays that examine how historical events are remembered and represented, such as in works that deal with issues of collective memory and

historical crises, as in the case of the Great Depression in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*.

The *Glass Menagerie* is considered an autobiographical memory as it addresses Tom's memories as Williams's own. This autobiographical sense is identified by the fact that Williams relied heavily on the autobiographical details of his characters. However, seeing it from a psychoanalytic perspective, it is apparently just that, according to all characters' memories, including Tom, they are just Williams's creation. Hence, perhaps Tennessee is remembering himself through Tom's role. Evidently, this is clear enough, as we see Tom take an omniscient view of other characters' memories; not just that, but the whole play is functioning in his memory, which renders it a memory play. The duality of Tom's persona as remembering for himself and for others is psychologically a construction of an imaginary memory. Subsequently, the interconnectedness between the playwright and Tom offered a play full of sophisticated memories.

Memory in *the Glass Menagerie* plays a crucial role in shaping the characters' perspectives and experiences. Tom, the narrator, constantly reflects on past events, and his memories of his mother and sister shape his present actions and decisions. Besides, Amanda's affection for her romantic history affects not just how she interacts with her children but also how she longs for a life she never had. Similarly, Laura's memories of her father and her past experiences with men have a profound impact on her present state of mind and actions. The play ultimately illustrates how our past experiences and memories shape our present and how longing for a different past can prevent characters from fully living in the present.

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