

Metaphorical Disability in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*

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Abstract—This paper analyses the disability in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* at three levels: the physical disability, cultural disability, and social disability, which is reflected in Laura's vulnerability, Tom's spiritual struggle as a gay man, and their mother Amanda's neuroticism. Through representations of the repressive social culture against the disabled and dramatizing the interconnected collision between the old South and modern society against the homophobic cultural background, Williams expresses his humanistic concerns.

Index Terms—Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, disease writing, metaphor

I. INTRODUCTION

First performed in 1944, *The Glass Menagerie* brought Williams a great deal of fame and established him as a playwright in the United States. *The Glass Menagerie* ran for 561 performances on Broadway and is regarded as a play that changed the whole landscape of American theatre. It won Williams the American Theatre Critics Award as the "Best Play of 1945". Unknown to the general public, Williams had been plagued by illnesses behind the scenes of his fame. American contemporary writer Sontag (2018) wrote at the beginning of her book *Illness as Metaphor*: "Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place" (p.13). For Williams, illness suffering was not a phase, but lasted a lifetime. Since Williams was a little boy, he was anxious about his strained relationship with his father, about being locked up in a mental institution like his sister Rose, which led to severe physical and mental health problems. Illness was chronic in Williams's life. He wrote while he was ill, and illness was a major concern in his plays. Since 1960s, writing itself became a form of illness for Williams: when there was no new production, he revised his previous work morbidly and tirelessly on a daily basis. In this sense, illness narration becomes a striking label for Williams's play writing. Studying the metaphors of illness in Williams's plays can help us to better grasp the profound connotations of the work. Following this concern, this paper explores the socio-cultural metaphorical meaning of illness in *The Glass Menagerie*, so as to understand the hidden social and political implications behind them, and provide a new critical paradigm for the study of the play.

II. THREE LEVELS OF DISABILITY IN *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*

A. Representation of the Repressive Social Culture against the Disabled

The Glass Menagerie is about a family that lives in a small apartment in St. Louis in Depression Era. Laura is a terribly shy girl, who is slightly lame in one leg because of a childhood illness. Williams in the "production notes" describes that "a childhood illness has left her crippled, one leg slightly shorter than the other, and held in a brace" (Williams, 1999, p.2). She is too physically and mentally fragile to cope with the high levels of pressure from the outside. In reality, Laura is firstly given up by her father, and then turned down by Jim, the gentleman caller, and finally abandoned by her brother, Tom. The emotional insecurity has "crippled" her as represented by her disability.

Laura feels guilty of her disability which causes her intense tension and fear in the family. In Scene three, when Amanda fights with Tom, Laura is described by the stage direction as standing in front of them "with clenched hands and panicky expression" (Williams, 1999, p.15). This action reveals her tension and fear; she believes that her disability places a burden on the family. Because of her lameness, Tom has to take on the responsibility to support the family and is forced to take on the role of father. Amanda says to Tom: "I mean that as soon as Laura has got somebody to take care of her, married, a home of her own, independent---why, then you'll be free to go wherever you please, on land, on sea, whichever way the wind blows you! But until that time you've got to look out for your sister" (Williams, 1999, p.22).

Bearing this pressure and fear, Laura believes it is she herself brings on this series of problems to Amanda and Tom. Falvo (2005) points out, "Guilt can be described as self-criticism or blame. Individuals or family members may feel guilty if they believe they contributed to, or in some way caused, the chronic illness or disability" (p.7). Laura believes that her inability to learn shorthand and typing skills to become self-sufficient is the reason for Amanda's nagging about Tom's family responsibilities. She feels that she has prevented Tom from pursuing his interests. Therefore, Laura always keeps silent at home and is unwilling to speak out her inner feelings, even lets her future to be determined by

Amanda and Tom. She seems to be the most vulnerable and the least aggressive member in the family and the only one in the play that never does anything to hurt anyone else. She follows her mother and brother's advice, instructions, and criticism without any complaint. She is so conscious of her lameness that she submits herself to Amanda who likes to exercise control of her children. She helps doing the housework and follows Amanda's directions. She attends Rubicam's Business College to learn a skill to survive. After dropping out of the business college, Laura accepts the arrangement to meet a gentleman caller in order to find someone she can rely on. Such obedience can be only explained as her compensatory behavior, as Adler (1995) asserted, "As inferiority feelings always produce tension, there will always be a compensatory movement towards a feeling of superiority but it will no longer be directed towards solving the problem. ... The real problem will be shelved or excluded. The individual will try to restrict his field of action and will be more occupied in avoiding defeat than in pressing forward to success. He will give the picture of hesitating, of being at a standstill, or even of retreating, before his difficulties" (p.52). Laura fully demonstrates her obedience to others because she can not adapt herself to a new world. Laura has absolutely no control over her life. As her mother says, she just "drifts along" (Williams, 1999, p.22). This is a common problem for people with disabilities.

Besides, the family lives in The Great Depression, a changing society which has transformed from a plantation economy into an industrialized one. Being crippled, Laura seldom leaves the apartment but busies herself taking care of her glass menagerie, a small group of delicate glass animals. When she talked about the unicorn with Jim, she said,

JIM: Unicorns — aren't they extinct in the modern world?

LAURA: I know!

JIM: Poor little fellow, he must feel sort of lonesome.

LAURA [smiling]: Well, if he does, he doesn't complain about it. He stays on a shelf with some horses that don't have horns and all of them seem to get along nicely together. (Williams, 1999, p.49)

Laura takes great care of the glass collections, and she believes they "get along nicely together". One plausible explanation is that Laura wanted to compensate for her physical deficiencies with the perfection and harmony she achieved in her collection. Just as Adler (1995) said, "Psychological compensation is the use of some 'auxiliary strategy' to obtain psychological balance..... pathological inferiority complex as a psychological defect, just like a human physical defect, automatically establishes a self-regulatory mechanism in some way to transform the inferiority complex into a superiority complex through 'oriented fiction', by which psychological balance and compensation can be obtained (p.54).

Here, it is necessary to exam the idea of disability in the Depression Era when the play takes place. The term "disabled" is never used; this population is known as "the crippled" collectively. The United States is only slowly beginning to move away from an era that, as Ferguson (2002) asserts, believes "moral blame (for a disability) is assigned to the parents, especially those with the bad judgement to be both poor and female" (p.124). Many people consider "the crippled" a burden to the family's economic pursuits because they are a violation of the moral and social codes of the day. These families have trouble advancing both socially and economically because mainstream society looks down upon them. As Longmore (2003) points out, "The majority of crippled children were excluded from public schools (the term "crippled" encompassed almost anyone with a disability), and those who were educated were done so in hospitals, in a more 'appropriate' setting, though public sentiment against educating them in any setting seems to have intensified in the 1930s" (p.58). Moreover, the Immigration Act of 1907 forbidden "anyone with a mental or physical defect which may affect the alien's ability to earn a living" to enter the United States, and a movement existed in the 1930s that called for their sterilization. With such treatment to society's crippled population, it is no wonder that Amanda's desire to see Laura married off is characterized by fits of frantic urgency. As Ferguson (2002) points out, "For families like the Wingfields who were unable to achieve upward mobility, often the only outcome was poverty" (p.125). This terrifies Amanda. Amanda believes that Laura is hindering the family's ability to climb the social ladder because her daughter refuses to engage with the outside world. Amanda asks her:

"So what are we going to do for the rest of our lives? Stay home and watch the parades go by? Amuse ourselves with the glass menagerie, darling? Eternally play those worn-out phonograph records your father left as a painful reminder of him?" (Williams, 1999, p.12).

When Amanda tells Tom that "it is terrible, dreadful, disgraceful that poor little sister has never received a single gentleman caller" (Williams, 1999, p.27), the disgrace rests on the entire Wingfield family. Amanda's words make it clear that she views her daughter's emotional state with scorn. She tells Tom that "all she does is fool with those pieces of glass and play those worn-out records" (Williams, 1999, p.23). Reflecting her embarrassment that Laura is so far removed from normal societal conventions, Amanda asks him, "What kind of a life is that for a girl to lead?" (Williams, 1999, p.23). And Amanda's thoughts are revealed most clearly when she asks Laura, "Why can't you and your brother be normal people? Fantastic whims and behavior! Preposterous going on!" (Williams, 1999, p.34). It is a clear indication that having an "old maid" (Amanda's words) as a daughter, one who is disabled, is shameful to Amanda.

Based on the discussion above, we can conclude that disability itself does not produce meaning, it is essentially given meaning by the culture of the society. In a society where normative standards abound, people with disabilities are marginalised by the able-bodied due to their obvious physical differences. It is thus clear that physical disability, under the discriminatory gaze of society, can be transformed into mental trauma for Laura.

B. Representation of Tom's Inner Struggle as a Homosexual

"Illnesses have always been used as metaphors to enliven charges that a society was corrupt or unjust" (Sontag, 2018, p.129). "Blindness may represent the incapacity of humanity to see into the future; lameness can designate the crippling effects of social ideologies..." (Snyder, 2002, p.45). Illness as a life phenomenon is often given a metaphorical function in literature. Illness in writers' works is not only a statement of the individual experience of suffering, but is also used as a metaphor and a critique of civilisation. The illnesses described in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* also serve this function. Actually, Williams focused on illness narration throughout his life. In a sense, he saw the study of mental illness as his life's work and an important direction for the creation of tragic art. Williams used the exploration of the causes of mental illness as an internal drive for artistic creation and as a means of understanding the nature of things. In *The Glass Menagerie*, mental suffering is ubiquitous.

Before the Stonewall Riot, social customs and legal restrictions prevented open discussion of homosexuality, and fear of discovery kept the gay world out of sight. The barriers erected against self-awareness made life for potential gays and lesbians more excruciating and forced them to sick or escape, just like Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, who had tried to flee away from the "nailed-up coffin" family all the time.

Tom, the breadwinner as he earns sixty-five dollars each month in a shoe company, is constantly threatening leaving home. In the play, Tom expresses frustrations in more overt and rebellious ways. He is openly insolent to his mother for her puritanical exhortations, and has been reading, in his mother's words, "that hideous book by that insane Mr. Lawrence," and more to her mother's perplexity, he is going to the movies "night after night," sometimes even goes out at nearly midnight (Williams, 1999, p.15). As a gay, or at least a latent gay, his homosexual consciousness is awakening and he is yearning for expressions and satisfactions.

Regrettably, in the homophobic culture of the 1940s, he was not able to state his intention openly:

Amanda: You will hear more, you—

Tom: No, I won't hear more, I'm going out!

Amanda: You come right back in—

Tom: Out, out, out! Because I'm— (Williams, 1999, p.15)

For Tom, this argument is a struggle for more freedom from his mother's puritanical control and eventually free expression to his homosexual nature. It can also be understood as Tom's tormented mind when he is coming to terms to his homosexual nature. For a gay, the question of "coming out" (public disclosure of one's sexual identity) or remaining in the closet is a matter of great magnitude. So long as he chooses to stay in the "closet", he has to take constant precautions to guard his homosexuality against revelation. While this may avoid public humiliation, it means a split personality for the gay. He is always acting two social roles and has to change his masks frequently when he is going between the world of the "straights" and that of the gays. Understandably, fear of being discovered and publicly disgraced is the theme of his life, for it is impossible for him, as social creatures, to ignore the social value orientation and moral evaluation.

American society is no doubt a patriarchal one. Like all patriarchal societies, in order to maintain the patriarchal social order and its value orientation, its social institutional system elevates heterosexuality as the sexual norm. As Estes (2000) mentions, "One (but not the only) reason gays and lesbians are marginalized is that their sexuality threatens heterosexual norms based on the domination of women" (p.3).

As a result, people, heterosexual or homosexual, have internalized the homophobia, treating homosexuality as a stunned orientation and convinced that the homosexual eroticism is an evil. Living in a homophobic culture, Williams had to absorb the homophobia, finding it impossible to free himself from it, which did him considerable psychological harm. So Williams repeatedly said that he wrote to release his tension and reject the prejudice against homosexuality. Dr. Lawrence S. Kubie, a Freudian analyst, diagnosed that Williams' tension resulted from his homosexuality. Writing for Williams was a powerful weapon to penetrate isolation. The essence of Freud's theory is a pessimistic theory of human civilization, which holds that the repression of unconscious instincts and desires is the price that humanity must pay for the development of civilisation. The psychoanalytic approach had a great influence on American literature and art in the 1920s and 1930s, including Williams. Meanwhile, in Williams's plays he shows his disgust with a society that first determines the private identity of those who have not found their supposedly conventional patterns of socio-sexual behaviour, and then systematically marginalises them. He presents the homosexual group's psychological trauma of living on the social margin inflicted by the homophobic society in portraying the homosexuals facing ostracism and isolation, escaping to repression, or being imprisoned in loneliness.

In a homophobic society, its members unconsciously take heterosexuality as the sexual norm to standardize their behavior, and make moral judgement on other members. The internalized homophobia, which they think as their conscience and reason, impels them to repel the sexual deviant out of their vision or force them to submit themselves by means of regulation and surveillance and even punishment. For the purpose of pointing out that homophobia is often a social phenomenon rather than individual prejudice, Williams makes a point of demonstrating the hostility toward homosexuality of the ordinary or lesser people who are in fact innocent and kind, rather than the punitive political leaders, capitalists or other conservative antigay crusaders. In doing so, Williams tries to tell us that they are malicious to the deviant not because of their ill-nature but homophobic convention planted in them. This hostility towards homosexuals is fully illustrated by what Tom suffers both at home and in the factory.

A society is a structure system. Family life depends on the culture of society of which a family is one part. A family,

as a small part of the total social structure, mostly reflects value orientation and cultural concept of its society. Once a concept and value orientation normative for the society becomes accepted by a family, its family member is praised when he follows the norms while punished when he does not. In a homophobic society, there is no sense of security for the homosexuals. Even at home, they are misunderstood and ridiculed.

There is no doubt that Amanda in the *Menagerie* is a loving and responsible mother. However, she fails to understand her son Tom with a homosexual preference by questioning his unusual behavior. Unconsciously, she acts as a supervisor representing the general society. With her firm puritan belief, she prevents Tom from reading the "hideous book by that insane Mr. Lawrence," "I cannot control the output of diseased minds or people who cater to them—, BUT I WON'T ALLOW SUCH FILTH BROUGHT INTO MY HOUSE! No, no, no, no, no!" (Williams, 1999, p.15). Seeing Tom goes to movies too often, she suspects that Tom must have been doing things that he is "ashamed of", so she keeps questioning him, trying to normalize Tom's behavior with her internalized social norms (Williams, 1999, p.16); she feels sad about her children's abnormality, "Both of my children—They're unusual children!" (Williams, 1999, p.15). As a mother, she believes it is her duty to regulate her children and submit them to the social norms. Her continuous questioning and nagging irritate Tom, pushing him to consider home as a "nailed coffin".

The workplace Tom is in is also not that friendly. In *Menagerie*, Williams presents clearly what a homosexual would meet when he is considered to be "abnormal" at the workplace where an individual's behavior is monitored by his workmates, who are planted in them the social value orientation. At the shoe factory, Tom feels greatly inconsistent with his workmates, who always talk behind his back, as Jim tells him, "Mr. Mendoza was speaking to me about you" (*Menagerie* 36). The hostility from other workmates in the warehouse alienates Tom from others. "the other boys in the warehouse regarded me with suspicious hostility" and "smile at me as people smile at an oddly fashioned dog who trots across their path at some distance regarded me with suspicious hostility" (Williams, 1999, p.31). In fact, it is an unspoken code concerning privacy that makes him weird due to their stereotype of something "different" of Tom, driving him to be isolated in the factory. Therefore, the working place is somewhere hostile and cold for Tom. This alienation is explicitly shown in the conversation between Jim and Tom:

JIM : In public speaking! You and me, we're not the warehouse type.

...

TOM : In what respect?

JIM : In every! Ask yourself what is the difference between you an' me and men in the office down front? Brains? — No! — Ability? — No! Then what? Just one little thing —

TOM : What is that one little thing?

JIM : Primarily it amounts to — social poise! Being able to square up to people and hold your own on any social level! (Williams, 1999, p.36)

By presenting the homosexuals being marginalized and isolated in such social units as family and social circle, Williams makes it clear that homophobia is ubiquitous in American society. So, Tom, with the social imposition that heterosexuality is the accepted sexual norm and homosexuality is an evil, feels guilt and is entrapped in the great panic of being separated from their social groups. The panic of ostracism and the strong sense of guilt forces Tom to escape: to avoid the suffocating homophobic atmosphere by running away.

C. Representation of the Crippling and Crushed Southern Civilization

As a Southerner born and bred, Williams frequently writes about the South. In Williams's plays, the heroines, rather than male protagonists, are blessed with a more complex and sympathetic portrayal. In the *Conversations with Tennessee Williams* edited by Albert J. Devlin (1986), Williams claims that he finds it "much easier, much more interesting to write about women" (p.116). In his major works, Williams explores the mechanism of fragile and deeply wounded spirit and psyche of women. Southern gentlewomen, such as Amanda in the *Menagerie*, have become the main focus of some critics.

Amanda deals with the physical and mental problems of her daughter with allusions to the South. She expresses to Laura that by cultivating "charm—and vivacity—and—charm!" (Williams, 1999, p.13) anyone can overcome disabilities. In fact, charm is the only trait of the South that Amanda is able to keep. All other qualities, such as prestige and social status, are lost in the migration to the big cities. The comfort of financial security and the large group of gentleman callers for young lady has gone with the wind. As Amanda's remembrances of the South increase, her longing for its stability also heightens. And in Amanda's mind, it is this idea of the gentleman caller, the saviour who could restore the gentility and comfort she once knew. Thus, she takes Jim's arrival very seriously. Tom as narrator voices in the introduction to *Menagerie*, the gentleman caller symbolizes "the long delayed but always expected something that we live for" (Williams, 1999, p.6). With her loss of the South, the gentleman caller becomes more and more important as the solution to all family's problems. Boxill (1987) maintains that, "this kind of nostalgia of the South, in this case the idea of the gentleman caller, reveals the disappointed ideal of a divine order of being" (p.5). Amanda's displacement from the south disrupts the order of her existence. And through illusions to the South and impractical hopes for Laura, Amanda maintains her family with a sense of displacement. And it is from Amanda's struggle to find a secure setting for their fantasies that the frustration occurs.

Undoubtedly, Amanda's life is a constant struggle between reality and illusion. She longs for the golden warmth of the South that she once had. Amanda is a character with great vivacity and determination. Against the Great Depression,

she did everything she could to keep her children well and alive with what she learned in the South—charm, vivacity, and a glossy view of complacent truths. However “scraping and clawing for survival rub against her grain. She retreats into numerous anecdotes of her days as the belle of the South” (Johns, 1985, p.327) but this irritates her Son, as Tom said,

AMANDA [crossing out to the kitchenette, airily]: Sometimes they come when they are least expected! Why, I remember one Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain —

...

TOM : I know what's coming!

LAURA : Yes. But let her tell it.

TOM : Again? (Williams, 1999, p.8)

Obviously, Amanda always talks about her old days in the Blue Mountain and this makes her neurotic because those features in the old South are ineffective in the big city of Saint Louis. Indeed, this tendency to romanticise the world has been one of the key sources of the rich mythology produced by the South at various stages of its history, in the colonial period, the antebellum period, the Confederate and the Reconstruction period, as Cash (1941) mentions: “Since reality was unbearable, mythology became supreme”(p.63). Of all the pictures of the mind created by the romantic Southerner, the legend of the Old South is considered one of the greatest and most attractive one. The Old South is smashed into pieces in the Civil War, however, it has been in the memory of southerners. The Old South has actually been integrated into the southern culture as an indispensable part. This cherishing of the ideal dream world of the past is one of the reasons why the southerners have been so reluctant to face the realities of the modern world; for it is clear that the myth of the perfect society is a powerful argument against change (Williams, 1974).

The Wingfields' deep root in the South makes them feel incongruous with the northern industrial values. Their suffering reflects what ordinary people experience during the social transformation from an agrarian society to an industrial one. The traditional ideology in which these people have grown up turns to a totally new one. These people are utterly unprepared for that and in this way they are uprooted. Just at this time, the dominating industrial ideology exercises its destructive power over them. Amanda's neurotic behaviour is the result of the rapid post-war coexistence of consumption and industrialization, which threatens and undermines the old system and relations of production.

III. CONCLUSION

Williams creates his stories around dysfunctional family relationships in a distorted social context, where he focuses on the bottom of society people to illustrate how the society can be so irrationally oppressive that it can cripple the human cultural ideology and social perception to the point of complete mental breakdown and failure to participate in any form of society. “The portrayal of people with disabilities in literature plays an important role in witnessing and reconciling social reality” (Chen, 2015, p.211). Having lived through major events such as World War II, the Cold War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the American civil rights movement of the 1960s, Williams is well aware of American domestic and foreign policy and therefore uses the metaphor of disease to critique American totalitarianism in an attempt to push those in power to implement more rational strategies for governing the country.

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