

Representing Repression: A Psychological Reading of *The Glass*

Menagerie

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As the tradition of realism dominated in the late 19th century, expressionism emerged along with the rise of psychology at the very end of the century. Expressionistic plays sought to give not the external reality or surface appearance of life but the inner reality, life as felt rather than as seen (Barnet 519). *The Glass Menagerie* is mostly expressionistic: the first sentence of the Production Notes declares that “it is a memory play.” The term “memory play” suggests that it is a play worked out in one’s mental process, rather than a realistic representation. Instead of external reality, the inner vision becomes the primary concern of expressionistic drama. Thus this paper focuses on the repressed state of each character in the Wingfield family, and tries to shed light on their inner psychology by means of psychoanalytical approach.

As a mother figure, Amanda is quite distinctive from those in conventional drama. With the father absent for years, Amanda takes on not only maternal nurturing responsibilities but also the paternal disciplinary role. She is a breadwinner (though partly) as well as a caretaker. Yet in her attempt to fulfill this double-sided role, she actually encounters a series of frustrations and repressions, which provoke her to escape into the retreat of past. In the play, what characterizes Amanda is her poignant sentiment toward the Old South days. She believes in the myth of “gracious living, family tradition, chivalry, coquetry” (Senata 23). Obsessed with the past, she frequently retold her memory

as a young girl who received at most seventeen gentleman callers within a Sunday afternoon. Once these memories are provoked, “her eyes lift, her face glows, and her voice becomes rich and elegiac” (*Glass* 10). The elegiac mood nevertheless permeates the entire representation of Amanda, who seems to be trapped in it.

Amanda in the present world, however, is faced with a bout of difficulties. She is a saleswoman by occupation, taking on a humiliating job as selling magazine subscription. She has to put up with those disrespectful responses from her client and, what’s worse, ends up being refused or even totally ignored. Her conversation with Ida Scott (*Glass* 23) explicitly demonstrates her failure to attract her clients, in spite of her passionate Old South hospitality, which nevertheless is proved to be inefficient in the modern business ethics. Secondly, Amanda’s own marriage is not totally unproblematic. As a woman who grew up in an environment of southern gentility, “sexuality is definitely not a topic Amanda would discuss” (*Senata* 25). Throughout the play Amanda seldom makes mention of her husband except that he is a drunkard who goes away without caring his own family. Yet the only thing in response for her fidelity is her husband’s betrayal and a malfunctioned family. Her husband’s betrayal sets her to re-think about her fidelity and foreshadows the impending climax of Laura’ marriage arrangement.

Moreover, Amanda as a mother is also confronted with constant tension with her children.. Knowing her daughter’s physical defect, Amanda decides that Laura should be able to earn her own living, and therefore sends her to a business school. But after she finds out that her daughter has dropped out of the course due to extreme shyness, she has to think of something else, that is, a reliable marriage. It is described in Scene One, when Amanda wants Laura to

stay fresh and pretty for her gentleman callers, Amanda is surprised to hear her daughter say she is not expecting any gentleman callers (*Glass* 11). Amanda reminisces vividly her gentleman callers in Blue Mountain, and she imposes her own old-fashioned nostalgia on her daughter in the present. She seems to lose contact with the present and assumes that her daughter is going to receive just as many callers. She then threatens her daughter with the dire situation of a lonely maid:

I've seen such pitiful cases in the South—barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister's husband or brother's wife!—stuck away in some little mousetrap of a room—encouraged by one in-law to visit another—little birdlike women without any nest—eating the crust of humility all their life! (*Glass* 19)

In this elaborate speech Amanda again situates Laura's present state within the framework of Old South where Amanda used to live. Anachronism thus becomes Amanda's most striking idiosyncrasy, her own belief to apply to whatever situations she has to face. To provide Laura at least with one suitor, she asks Tom to bring a colleague home so that Laura may have some opportunities to be married. Yet the result proves to be in vain, because Tom is not aware of his friend's engagement. Infuriated at Tom's total ignorance and the incurring expenses "to entertain some other girl's fiancé," Amanda tells Tom to leave directly so that nothing "will interfere with [his] selfish pleasure" (*Glass* 122). Amanda's ideal situation is messed up by Tom's ignorance and, more importantly, by her own ignorance of the present state. Her little world has collapsed within a short period of time (Bauer-Briski 32). For one thing, despite expense she puts in Laura's education, it nevertheless ends up as a "fiasco." For

another, the gentleman caller to whom Amanda entrusts her hope turns out to be engaged with another girl. The last hope being annulled, Amanda resignedly accepts the fact that there will be any suitor since Tom has left them behind, and that there is no prospect for Laura as well as for herself.

While their mother Amanda flees back to her past to seek shelter from the harsh reality, Tom and Laura have their own way to give vent to their repression. Tom is a mediocre warehouse worker whose interest lies in poetry writing and adventurous expedition. Having a bosom of ambitions and prospects for himself, he is yet trapped in the job he is taking, which denies him all of the fanciful possibilities. By instinct, according to Tom, “man is a lover, a hunter, a fighter, but none of these instincts are given much play at the warehouse” (*Glass* 40). His protest is nevertheless soon rebuffed by Amanda:

Man is by instinct! Don't quote instinct to me! Instinct is something that people have got away from! It belongs to animals!

Christian adults don't want it! (*Glass* 40)

Instead, Amanda points out that Christian adults are supposed to pursue those superior, spiritual things instead of being driven by their animalistic instinct. Therefore movie going becomes a vicarious access through which his instincts can be gratified. Movie is an imaginary text where his suppressed self is able to work out to his heart's content. But just watching movies is not enough to provide him with excitement, because he wants to engage in these adventures on his own. He realizes these instincts by turning his back to his mother and daughter and participating in the Union of Merchant Seaman, which nevertheless leaves him a strong sense of guilt for his sister.

Laura, given her own physical disability and intimidated temperament, finds solace in retreating to the delicate world of glass menagerie collection. Her glass

animals are her escape mechanism, as the movies are Tom's and the past is Amanda's" (Griffin 29). The difference from Tom or Amanda, as Bauer-Briski points out, is that Laura's withdrawal "fails to establish the contact with reality" (Bauer-Briski 32). In other words, she is completely isolated from the external world, which is so hostile and cruel for a delicate girl like her. At the beginning of Scene Six, she is almost described as a fragile object:

The arrangement of Laura's hair is changed; it is softer and more becoming. A fragile unearthly prettiness has come out in Laura: she is like a piece of translucent glass touched by light, given a momentary radiance, not actual, not lasting. (*Glass* 62)

Laura is described as an object that is exposed to male gaze: her hair "soft and becoming," her face "unearthly fragile." She is thus identified as one of the unanimated glass animals, only to be watched and "touched" by other forces. She becomes one more beautiful but fragile piece in the collection, no longer vulnerable to the depredations of social process or time but no longer redeemed by love (Bigsby 38).

In spite of the different ways they adopt to face reality, Tom's movie-going and Laura's glass collection unanimously correspond to a deeper psychological process, explicated by a psychoanalyst Carl Jung. According to Carl Jung, once a man's instinct is suppressed by the environment, it will not be suddenly eliminated as if it never existed. On the contrary, it will merge into the unconscious part of human mentality. The collective unconscious, owing to its inappropriateness and incompatibility in real life, is oftentimes concealed in our deep psychology (Jung 997). Therefore, a work of art, including literature and movies, functions as a mediator that provokes its readers' deeper psychology, namely, the collective unconscious. By coming in contact with these artistic

works, people can find something they can identify with, something whose voice speaks louder than does their individual whisper. These primordial images have such a strong power that they “enthrall and overpower” the readers, transforming readers’ personal destiny into “the destiny of mankind” (Jung 999). In this way, movie-going and glass-collection playing can be an emotional outlet which not only enables us to release certain suppressed feelings but also gives us a heartening embrace in our most difficult times. In a similarly way, Tom and Laura both find out an alternative channel which enables them to gain their respective wishful fulfillment. Amanda, however, does not find any comfort in the material world but moves back to her past, a retreat in which harsh realities no longer exist.

To sum up, the three members in the Wingfield family suffer from a great number of repressions, and each of them represent different methods of solution. The old generation prefers appealing to the past: by looking back to her Old South times, Amanda is actually trying to re-affirm the old values she used to stick to. Yet the more she indulges in the past, the more isolated she is from the reality. On the contrary, past for Tom or Laura is yet to take shape so they cling to some materialistic pursuit. These pursuits serve as a vicarious gratification to relieve them of their repression temporarily. It is still noteworthy that Tom is able to get his wishful thinking materialized when the movies fail to satisfy his repressed desire, whereas Laura cannot afford such a luxury: her physical disability implicitly foreshadows her incapability of action and she is doomed to be confined within her fragile world for the rest of her life. Therefore, different levels of repression are presented in the three characters in the Wingfield family, and they altogether weave a picture of discordant nature and foreshadow the ensuing battle and conflict within the household.

1. The paper is well argued.
2. State your approach in the first paragraph, for instance, “I am going to discuss the repressed desires in terms of Jungian analytical psychology.
3. Introduce Jung’s theory before you engage in the analysis of the characters.

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