

Memory Color in *The Glass Menagerie*

WANG Ning

Lanzhou University of Arts and Science, Lanzhou, China

Tennessee Williams is a talented American playwright who concerns about the outcasts of the society. He succeeds in inventing and developing the memory device to create vivid characters in *The Glass Menagerie* on December 26, 1944. This paper mainly analyzes how memory color is expressed in the text from derivation of the play, autobiographical aspect of the play to so-called memory play, mainly focusing on the following two aspects: (1) the stage devices with memory color; and (2) the characters with memory color. From this kind of interpreting angle, the influence of memory color in *The Glass Menagerie* and its literary value in text study are showed.

Keywords: Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, memory play

Introduction to Tennessee Williams

Thomas Lanier Williams, later called Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) was born in Mississippi. As Arthur Miller in 2000 remarked, Tennessee Williams:

Broke new ground by opening up the stage to sheer sensibility, and not by abandoning dramatic structure but transforming it. What was new in Tennessee Williams was his rhapsodic insistence on making form serve his utterance. He did not turn his back on dramatic rules but created new ones... With *The Glass Menagerie*, the long-lost lyrical line was found again, and supporting it, driving it on, an emotional heroism, that outflanked even values themselves; what he was celebrating was not approval or disapproval but humanity, the pure germ of enduring life. (as cited in Roudane, 2000, p. 31)

About *The Glass Menagerie* (1944)

Derivation of the Play

The origin of the play lies in a short story "Portrait of a Girl in Glass" written around 1941 by Williams, later under contract to MGM (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) in Hollywood, he developed it into a screenplay *The Gentleman Caller*, about a woman awaiting a gentleman caller. This, on December 26, 1944, had been improved and finally became *The Glass Menagerie*. Three months later, the play revised many times opened on Broadway, New York, where won the Drama Critics Circle Award immediately.

Autobiographical Aspect of the Play

The writer BAI Xian-yong (2000) once said: "Unlike many other writers, Tennessee Williams' plays are so closely related to his own life that each one of them could be regarded as his autobiography" (as cited in Roudane, 2000, p. 31).

Tennessee Williams grew up in the south. So the southern complex is projected obviously. Clearly, southern

literary tradition are in his work. The first of these elements is his complicated feelings about time and the past. The past is usually liked upon with sadness, guilt, or fear. Like many other southern writers, he described his society as a kind of “hell” of brutality and race hatred. Its sick spirit is presented in all his plays.

Tennessee Williams’ personal life was very unhappy. He struggled with depressions throughout his life and lived with the fear that he would go insane as did his sister. His personal tragedy came to an end when he got terribly choked after a heavy night of drinking and soon died on February 25, 1983. “Therefore pathos is the impelling quality of this depiction of ‘lives of quiet desperation’” (Day, 1975, p. 295).

Memory Play

As Williams himself insisted in the production notes, *The Glass Menagerie* is a “memory play” which, because of its considerably delicate or tenuous material, justifies atmospheric touches and subtleties of direction and overt resistance to realism that had long dominated American theatre.

At the very beginning of the play, Williams explains that *The Glass Menagerie* is a play told from memory by the mouth of the narrator Tom Wingfield.

Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. 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. To begin with, I turn back time... (Reinert, 1966, p. 527)

The stage devices with memory color. Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, and it is not realistic. In memory, everything seems to happen to music. Whether the setting, the music, or the lighting, all of them emphasize the strong memory color.

The characters with memory color. For Amanda, the past of living in the beautiful Blue Mountain represents her youth before time worked its dark alchemy.

Memory has become myth, a story to be endlessly repeated as a protection against present decline. She wants nothing more than to freeze time; and in this she mirrors a region whose myths of past grace and romantic fiction mask a sense of present decay. In Williams’ words, she clings to another time and place. (Roudane, 2000, p. 38)

Laura retreating from reality and escaping into the timeless world of her imagination is one of the many “gentle creatures” destroyed by life in Williams’ plays. Her glass animals have a delicate beauty, but they are extremely fragile which take Laura into a mythical world where Laura can enjoy peace and happiness alone. She lives in her illusions so that she is forced to deceive when her enrollment in a typewriting course ends in fiasco.

For Tom,

Memories of the past are a distraction from present failure for though situated in time they exist outside of time. In summoning those memories into existence, he transposes experience into a series of images, transforms life into art, in so doing mimics the process which his namesake Tom Williams adopts in creating plays, for, as Williams has remarked, the virtue of a play lies in the fact that it occurs “outside of time”, indeed that it is “a world without time”. (Roudane, 2000, p. 39)

For these characters, although memory appears to be romantic, it is a crippling force that prevents them from finding happiness in the present.

Maybe Jim O’Connor has the least memory color. He is a nice and ordinary young man who has been expected by all the Wingfield family. Because the family is unable to overcome the difficulty of accepting the real

life, and every member withdraws into a private world of illusion where each can find much comfort that exists outside the real world, whereas Jim is capable of living in the reality. When he knows Laura has adored him since high school, he cottons to her, or more exactly, he cottons to his past glory. But actually, Jim is too ordinary to bring hope to Laura and the Wingfield family. Finally, the expected gentleman caller became a gentleman goer.

Conclusions

Tennessee Williams undoubtedly has opened a new path for the creation of the modern drama and has put fresh vitality into American theater with poetic and expressionistic artifices.

In the last scene, Tom asked Laura to blow the candles out. Although Laura put them out, the powerful memory would still haunt in Tom's mind and continued to exert some influence upon him. *The Glass Menagerie*, beginning with memory and ending with memory, leaves readers an abundant imagination.

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