

Traumatized Interpretations of Female Characters in American Southern Culture in *The Glass Menagerie*

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Tennessee Williams is the most famous Southern playwright in the history of 20th century American literature, and southern identity is a thread that runs throughout Williams' work. *The Glass Menagerie* is one of his highly representative dramatic works. The play tells the story of how an ordinary family in deep identity crisis escapes the harsh reality and cultural trauma during the Great Depression in the United States. Using trauma theory as a tool, this paper explores the complex relationship between the deep-seated causes of the tragedy of the two female characters in the play and the historical context through the traumatic events experienced by the characters in the play and the different attitudes they show in the face of trauma. Through this, the vulnerability and identity crisis of individuals during the period of social change and cultural breaks are analyzed. The purpose of the paper is to arouse human beings' thoughts on how to cope with cultural integration and foreign cultural invasion, and how to obtain salvation when they are amid an identity crisis.

Keywords: The Glass Menagerie, trauma, female, culture

Introduction

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) was a 20th-century playwright alongside Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. In his more than 50 years of literary life, he wrote more than 70 plays, two volumes of poetry, a memoir, five volumes of essays, and many short stories. In 1944, his best-known work, *The Glass Menagerie*, was performed in Chicago, establishing his important position in the American theater world.

Scholar Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "the unavoidable experience of a sudden, catastrophic event to which the response is often delayed, uncontrollable, and recurring through hallucinations or other intrusive means." Another scholar, Judith Herman, divides the symptoms of trauma into three categories: hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. In her article *Trauma and Recovery*, she suggests that "'hyperarousal' is the persistent anticipation of danger; 'intrusion' is the traumatic memory of the moment of trauma that lingers; 'constriction' reflects the numbing response to giving in and giving up.

One of Williams' major contributions to American literature was to bring Southern history and culture to the theater stage. The South was not only the setting but also the object of Williams's plays. The United States in the 1930s was experiencing the Great Depression. The whole society was depressing, apathetic, and full of uncertainty. In the changing society, women, who have always been regarded as the weakest, naturally became the most vulnerable and easy to be preyed upon. Trauma is a key factor in the tragic fate of the main female characters in *The Glass Menagerie*. Therefore, this paper utilizes trauma theory to analyze the traumatic events

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experienced by Amanda and Laura, to explore the causes of the trauma as well as the social changes and cultural traumas that are implicit in their personal manifestations of trauma, and to seek avenues of redemption, in the hope of giving some insight to people living in today's culturally intertwined society.

As Tennessee Williams' first successful play, *The Glass Menagerie*, unlike the war-themed plays that filled the stage during the same period, is a refreshing portrayal of the hardships of the average American family during the Great Depression and recreates the true state of American life in the 1930s. Since then, *The Glass Menagerie* has received widespread attention from audiences, readers, and scholars for its ingenious conception, fascinating artistic skills, and poetic language. Foreign studies on *The Glass Menagerie* are categorized into narrative studies, psychological studies, and homosexual studies. It was only in the 1990s, when *The Glass Menagerie* was introduced to China through translation that Chinese scholars began to study it. Since then, domestic research has begun on a large scale, including psychoanalytic and narrative studies of the characters in the play: exploring the southern identity of the female characters, the significance of the father's role, and character analysis of Tom.

The reviewed literature suggests that numerous scholars from home and abroad have done respectable studies on *The Glass Menagerie*. However, previous studies have focused on dual narrative studies and psychoanalytic studies. Few scholars have used trauma theory to conduct research, and existing studies have also focused mainly on the emotional trauma and bonding between family members, without placing the character's tragedy in a historical context and exploring the cultural trauma implicit in it.

The Decline of the Old American South

In the late 1820s, the U.S. Congress agreed that the South could keep slaves, a decision that led to the Southerners' eventual erection of the flag of independence and five years of civil war with the North. The defeat of the South in the Civil War in 1865 and the ensuing military occupation was a fatal blow to Southerners. The Civil War brought not only military defeat to the South, but also a series of severe economic, cultural, and political blows. Some critics have pointed out that it was "the conflict with the North that created the South" (Cobb, 2005, p. 60), making the South not only a geographical concept but also a collective memory. The damage done to the collective identity of Southerners by the defeat of the Civil War was undoubtedly a cultural trauma.

There is a distinct difference between the Northern and Southern cultures in American history. The culture of the American South was built on plantations and was distinguished by its stability, quaintness, romance, and backwardness. The American South is not only a geographic and historical concept, but also a social and cultural one, and the greatest divide between the South and the North was in their attitudes towards slavery (Hu, 2023, p. 223). The American South indulged in its own false superiority and order legitimacy. Williams paints a heartfelt portrait of Southerners amid the identity crisis of the 20th century, unable to forget the elegant lifestyle of the Old South, but unable to adapt to the monetary order and brutal competition for survival of the industrialized society imposed by the North.

The culture of the American South has historically ended in tragedy. History is constantly moving forward, and those who are unable to keep up with its development can only be crushed under the wheels of the times. After the American Civil War, the economy of the South was fully integrated into the modern industrial economy of the North, and the quaint and backward form of rural life that was compatible with the plantation economy was destroyed. The materialistic pragmatism of the North destroyed the chivalry and romantic flavor of the South. American Southerners faced drastic changes in society and experienced loss, confusion, emptiness, loneliness, and even despair in their plight.

The Quintessential “Southern Lady”—Amanda

The American Civil War led to dramatic changes in the lives of Southerners. Some Southerners recognized reality and chose to adapt to the pristine environment, while others escaped reality and lived in the memory of the elegant and comfortable decorum of the past. The Southern woman was born into these particular historical conditions. The Southern woman may have many suitors before marriage, allowing her to demonstrate her elegance and charm. Among these many suitors, such a lady will choose a gentleman as her spouse. To be at the top of the social ladder and to please men, the Southern lady was often a model of submissiveness, but the title “Southern lady” allowed women of the time to be happily bound by the standards set for them by men, and they willingly left their fate to the dominant male.

It was the once glamorous Southern ladies who became the most prominent group of escapist after the decline of the Civil War Southern plantation economy. They had trouble accepting reality and forgetting the past. They often indulge in memories of the past and fantasize about the future. They try to escape from the miserable life situation, trying to return to the original life, but in the end, they cannot realize these wishes. The traditional romantic concepts of southern culture are not strong enough in the face of the cruel reality. Southern culture has lost its original flavor, and the women who grew up in this context are gradually on the road to decline (Du & Li, 2016, p. 66). Tennessee’s Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* is the quintessential Southern lady.

In Southern culture, women are expected to be unconditionally submissive to men, and the dependence that comes with this submissiveness has caused Southern women to gradually lose the sense that they can change their destiny by struggling on their own. The extinction of Southern culture has caused serious psychological trauma to Amanda. The inability to get rid of the identity of the “Southern lady” is an important reason why Amanda has never been able to get out of the shadow of trauma and has lived a miserable life.

Amanda is obsessed with Southern culture and cannot help herself. Like any other Southern lady, she struggles with loneliness and poverty, constantly reminiscing about the glories and coziness of her past, and only then can she find a shred of comfort. “Reconstructing of the trauma story begins with a review of the patient’s life before the trauma and the circumstances that led up to the event” (Herman, 1992, p. 176). As a result of her husband’s departure, Amanda fell victim to traditional marriage and social norms and was forced to bear the burden of raising her children alone. Her husband’s departure left an indelible impression on her, and she often reminisced about her landscape in the Blue Mountains. “My callers were gentlemen-all! Among my callers were some of the most prominent young planters of the Mississippi Delta-planters and sons of planters!” (Williams, 2009, p. 754) Amanda also often complains in front of Tom and Laura that she regrets not choosing a plantation owner over a telephone company clerk. Her choice is characterized by a southern woman’s quest for romance (Wang, 1991, p. 152).

That Fitzhugh boy went North and made a fortune—came to be known as the Wolf of Wall Street! He had the Midas touch, whatever he touched turned to gold! And I could have been Mrs. Duncan J. Fitzhugh, mind you! But -I picked your father! (Williams, 2009, p. 754)

Amanda always sought solace in her memories and escaped this unpleasant reality. Through Amanda’s reminiscences and confessions, we pity her. But Tom’s words reveal the fact that the suitors Amanda speaks of are all married and have children and are even dead. “Isn’t this the first you’ve mentioned that still survives?” (Williams, 2009, p. 754) The truth is that the plantation owners who once courted Amanda have been crushed by the wheels of history along with the Old South, and the good times Amanda still remembers are a thing of the past.

The personal trauma of the “Southern Lady” cannot be resolved, and the decline of the Old South has become a cultural trauma in the process of modernization. Amanda, however, is unable to come to terms with the changes in the real world, and she takes a decidedly trauma-avoidant stance, becoming increasingly obsessed with her memories of her teenage years in the Old South. But Amanda’s two children are the key to her healing from this trauma, as Tom and Laura not only remove her resentment toward her husband, but also allow her to escape the intrusion of her Southern memories and become strong and independent enough to take on the responsibilities of motherhood in real life. When Laura is upset about her limp, Amanda tells her that

you’re not crippled, you just have a little defect—hardly noticeable, even! When people have some slight disadvantage like that, they cultivate other things to make up for it—develop charm-and vivacity—and—charm! That’s all you have to do! One thing your father had plenty of—was charm! (Williams, 2009, p. 757)

Instead of complaining when Laura is frustrated, Amanda is positive and encourages Laura to be optimistic about her disadvantage. Amanda’s encouragement and compliments to Tom were heartfelt as well. “Try and you will succeed! Why, you’re just full of natural endowments! Both of my children—they’re unusual children! Don’t you think I know it? I’m so proud!” (Williams, 2009, p. 759) Although Amanda does not understand Tom’s love of watching movies and his desire to go out and have adventures, here we can see that Amanda still encourages Tom to cheer along for the sake of maintaining the family.

A Derivative of the Old South Tragedy—Laura

Laura is a kind but shy girl with low self-esteem (Hu & Cao, 2006, p. 55). Even though the story takes place in the 1930s, Amanda has an enormous impact on Laura’s psyche by constantly talking about her memories of the “Blue Mountains” of the past. Amanda is trapped in the normative and dogmatic upbringing of the Old South, which creates a deep sense of anxiety and inferiority for Laura. Laura did not experience the idyllic pastoral life of the Old South that Amanda describes. “This building, which runs parallel to the footlights, is flanked on both sides by dark, narrow alleys which run into murky canyons of tangled clotheslines, garbage cans and the sinister latticework of neighboring fire-escapes” (Williams, 2009, p. 752). Laura and Tom grew up in this environment.

By the end of the 19th century, people were becoming pessimistic. And Amanda was in a self-absorbed, self-absorbed space, attributing what happened to her to the failure of her marriage. As a result, Amanda struggles with her daughter, imparting her education as a “Southern lady” to Laura in the hope that she will be able to lead a happier life. Amanda places so many grand expectations on Laura, which creates a great deal of psychological pressure on Laura (Hu & Cao, 2006, p. 56). Amanda sent Laura to school wanting her to learn in order to support herself in the future. However, Amanda’s first expectation was put to rest when Laura developed a physical aversion to what she was being taught and had to leave school. Amanda’s second expectation of Laura was to find her a decent gentleman as a husband, a man who could take care of Laura and help the whole family. Influenced by her own alcoholic husband, who eventually abandoned the family, Amanda takes Laura’s search for a husband very seriously. At first, Amanda dwells on the glamorous image she had in the “Blue Mountains,” referring frequently to the time when she was a girl and the gentlemen who came to her with their attentions, and expects the same of her daughter, Laura. But Tom’s words made Amanda recognize the truth that Laura is a cripple and too introverted. These two characteristics made it impossible for a suitor to come to her door. This is like ripping open the scars in Amanda’s psyche, stripping her of the good, flashy memories of her past, and destroying the value system that the Southern culture has built up in her perception of herself.

Laura's salvation comes primarily from her own glass menagerie, which also symbolizes Laura's pure inner world. This world has been trodden on and destroyed by two men. One was Tom who broke the glass doll on Laura's cabinet when he had an argument with his mother, and the other was Jim who broke Laura's favorite glass unicorn when she allowed him to enter her inner world. But no matter what, the glass menagerie was always a clean slate for Laura to heal her trauma.

Conclusion

Trauma theory offers new perspectives for the study of characterization in Tennessee Williams' plays. This paper explores the defeat of the American Old South and the trauma that Southern culture inflicted on the two female figures in *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda, and Laura, and how they found safe environments to heal their traumas. The extinction of Southern culture has caused serious psychological trauma to Amanda. Amanda's inability to get rid of the image of the "Southern lady" in her bones was a major reason Amanda was never able to get out of the shadow of her trauma, and why she lived a miserable life. However, Amanda took her own responsibility and tried to make her family move forward in a better direction, and finally found a safe environment in her family. Because of the lack of father's love, mother's oppression, and her own low self-esteem and vulnerability, Laura suffers from psychological trauma. Although she is not a direct victim of the culture of the old American South, she is still bound by her mother's use of that set of ideological structures in her life. But Laura found a safe environment in the glass world, in the pure world that belongs to her only to dissipate psychological trauma. Through Amanda and Laura's attitudes toward traumatic events and methods of healing, we are given insights for coping with the great blending of cultures and confronting cultural invasion. That is to say, it is only through the liberation of women's minds and their independence from the self-consciousness of the "other" that they can heal their traumas and gain hope and happiness.

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