

Trauma Caused by the Southern Belle Values on Two Main Female Characters in *The Glass Menagerie*

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To some extent, there are some tragic characteristics on two main female characters, Amanda Wingfield and Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and these tragic characteristics are mainly induced by the profound influence of the Southern Belle Values. These values severely limited Amanda and Laura's development and made them suffer from persistent trauma. Influenced by these values, Amanda tended to be submissive to her husband and eventually her husband abandoned the whole family, which made Amanda could not be a decent Southern Belle and left a terrible trauma to her. Laura was inculcated with Southern Belle Values when she was a child, so she also desired to be an ideal Southern Belle, but the physical and psychological deficiencies made it impossible, which made Laura quite disappointed and brought her severe trauma.

Keywords: the Southern Belle Value, *The Glass Menagerie*, trauma

The Southern Belle Values and the Trauma Theory

Amanda Wingfield and Laura Wingfield, two essential female protagonists in *The Glass Menagerie*, are typical representatives whose mindset is deeply penetrated by the Southern Belle Values and these values exert enormous influences on their lives and cause virtually irreversible traumas on them. These values can also be regarded as the bane of the traumas and misery they experienced.

The Southern Belle Values

There are some transparent differences between the southern culture and the northern culture in America. Industry and commerce are viewed as the priority of the American North and there were endless immigrants from Europe in the 19th century, which made the northern culture more diverse, while the American South mainly focused on agriculture and plantation economy once possessed an important position in the south, which helped formulate a specific value system and social hierarchy. The Southern Belle Values originated from such a special social background.

The southern culture was based on the plantation economy, which is steady, picturesque, romantic but a bit primitive. Therefore, their culture is characterized by decency, elegance, and indulgence. Due to the desperate pursuit of romance, it is difficult for them to face reality (Du & Li, 2016). The American South suffered a lot in the American Civil War and the life of southerners also changed dramatically, so some southerners' attitudes

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towards life gradually changed with time. On one hand, some southerners decided to face reality bravely and automatically adapted to the new environment. On the other hand, the rest of the southerners chose to escape from reality and dwelt on the past all the time. The Southern Belle Values came into being under the circumstances.

Under the impact of such values, the Southern Belle is defined as a lady who is graceful and versatile. In fact, instead of describing that southern women lived under the oppression of patriarchy, it is more accurate to clarify that in order to consolidate their position as a subordinate, they adopted a positive and accommodating attitude to please their husbands. Although sometimes these southern ladies have to obey men's will and hide or even suppress their own nature and emotions due to the lack of independent economic ability, the admiration of southern gentlemen for their elegant and obedient behavior, as well as the glory they feel at dances, still make them willing to maintain or even adhere to the cultural norms of a Southern Belle (Fan, 2016). At that time, the reason why women in the south received education was that they desired to present a perfect image as a qualified mother and they learned all sorts of skills so as to ingratiate their suitors. They were tempted by the southern belle values to marry a gentleman and be submissive to their husband. Tragically, deeply influenced by such values, they were willing to be controlled by men who were in a dominant position.

The Trauma Theory

The word "trauma" is originated from Greek, whose initial meaning refers to the physical harm suffered by the human body due to external forces. At the end of the 20th century, influences caused by trauma began to be studied by more and more scholars, and the trauma theory was gradually introduced into literary study.

Cathy Caruth (1996) defined trauma as an unavoidable experience of a sudden catastrophe event, in which the response to the event is often delayed, uncontrollable, and repeated through hallucinations or other intrusive means. Judith Herman classified the symptoms of trauma into three categories: hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. She also provided a three-step plan for trauma recovery, which includes establishing a safe environment, reviewing morning, and rebuilding a sense of connection. In *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda and Laura suffered from trauma caused by the Southern Belle Values and their life was deeply influenced by the trauma. Male characters in the play chose to escape from them and the terrible, stressful life, while Amanda and Laura always floundered under the pressure of society and life, but they also tried their best to resist the impact of trauma caused by Southern Belle Values.

Trauma Caused by Southern Belle Values on Amanda

The Glass Menagerie is set in the Great Depression, but Amanda forcefully lived in another time and space by constantly recounting memories of the "Blue Mountains" of the past. Amanda grew up on a plantation in the southern United States and lived a leisurely and prosperous life. She was deeply influenced by romantic ideas from a young age. Despite struggling to survive in a crowded St. Louis apartment, she still tried to maintain a Southern ladylike lifestyle, constrained by strict moral standards in both behavior and ideology (Zhang & Chen, 2019). As a typical representative of Southern Belle, Amanda indulged herself in southern culture and could not extricate herself from it. In her teenage years, Amanda was a typical southern lady. In her memories, she not only had a "beautiful face" and a "slender figure", but also was versatile, articulate, and adaptable to various situations (Li, 2024). Deeply influenced by the Southern Belle Values, Amanda struggled in a lonely and impoverished environment and could not help recalling the glory and warmth of the past, because only in this way could she

find a shred of comfort. These values constantly reminded her that all the misery she suffered should be boiled down to the failure of her marriage.

Due to the influence of Southern Belle Values, Amanda was very obedient to her husband and gradually lost herself. Although Amanda was abandoned by her husband, she never felt angry about his irresponsible behavior and often immersed herself in the beautiful moments she had with her husband in the past. Amanda wanted to change reality and pursue happiness, but at the same time, she could not escape the influence of the Southern Belle Values, which caused Amanda to suffer trauma (Zhang, 2021). In her opinion, alcohol was the main culprit that led to her failed marriage, but as a southern lady, she had to obey her husband. Her husband, who drank heavily and abandoned his wife and children, brought Amanda painful memories that often plagued her as a trauma. She tried to forget those unpleasant things, but often got pulled back to the cruel reality because of some trivial things. For example, alcohol left a lasting trauma on Amanda, who had developed feelings of fear and even disgust towards alcohol. Therefore, she often taught her son Tom not to drink excessively, fearing that he would become a drunkard like his father.

The trauma caused by Southern Belle Values to Amanda is also reflected in her anxiety about her daughter Laura's future and marriage. On the one hand, Amanda insisted on sending her to a business school, because in Amanda's subconsciousness, women must rely on their own beauty and charm to marry a gentleman, and Laura precisely lacked these qualities. Therefore, she hoped that Laura could learn a skill so that she could marry a better person and have a happy life in the future. On the other hand, as a southern lady, in Amanda's world, women must rely on men to find the path to happiness. When faced with the fact that her daughter was disabled, she often deceived herself to escape reality and held unrealistic fantasies about the future. At the same time, she felt quite anxious about her daughter Laura's marriage, and worried that she would not be able to find a suitable marriage partner, so she urged her son Tom to introduce Laura to an outstanding young man, Jim. At first, Amanda had a fantasy that Jim would marry her daughter Laura and lead a happy life. However, after learning that Jim was engaged, Amanda's fantasy was completely shattered. Therefore, when things did not align with these values, she felt quite painful and helpless, which left indelible trauma in her heart. This trauma like a haunting ghost occasionally disturbed Amanda's life due to small things in her life.

Trauma Caused by Southern Belle Values on Laura

A Southern Belle is often depicted as flawless, physically sound, and elegant. The Southern Belle Values emphasize women's gentleness, obedience, and elegance, requiring girls to appear reserved and introverted in front of men. Laura was deeply influenced by this concept and became extremely introverted and shy. She always cared too much about her physical defects, thinking that she was not perfect and did not meet the standards of a lady, which had led to a strong sense of inferiority, afraid to socialize with others, and even nervous to the point of vomiting when facing others.

Laura suffered from leg disabilities due to childhood illnesses, which created a huge gap between her and the standard image of a southern lady. This difference made Laura extremely insecure. Laura is partially paralyzed, with one leg being somewhat shorter than the other. Therefore, she has to wear a brace to support her leg. However, being sensitive by nature, she has thought that the brace generates thunderous sounds when she walks and people around her depreciate her in terms of her physical flaws. To relieve anguish in her heart, Laura gets immersed in the ideal world of *The Glass Menagerie* and keeps away from society. Any healthy person

would mock her disability, which led to a strong sense of self disgust and affected her self-identity and confidence and this kind of trauma affected Laura's life for a long time.

Laura has been inculcated with the values of being a Southern Belle by her mother since she was a child, and these values had been deeply rooted in her heart. A Southern Belle is usually expected to be good at socializing, able to attract others and be charming in social situations. However, Laura is introverted, shy, and physically disabled, which makes her even more afraid of socializing and extremely nervous in social situations. She was unwilling to participate in social activities or make new friends, and showed resistance to going to school. In the end, Laura chose to play truant and stayed in her glass menagerie with those glass animals as companions (Liu, 2023). The idea of becoming a Southern Belle seemed to have plunged Laura into a quagmire, while reality has made her realize that she cannot truly become a lady. This gap brought about by the values of a southern lady has traumatized Laura, and Laura's choice to stay in the comfortable glass menagerie and befriend glass animals is a manifestation of her escape from the trauma caused by the Southern Belle Values.

The Southern Belle Values emphasize that women should obtain their social status and economic security through marriage, and families have high expectations for women's marriage. Laura's mother Amanda is a typical Southern Belle who has high expectations for Laura's marriage. Amanda extremely hoped that Laura could become a Southern Belle, which brought great psychological pressure to Laura. On the one hand, Laura herself also longed to become the Southern Belle her mother desired her to be, beautiful and elegant, with many suitors, and able to obtain a happy and fulfilling marriage; on the other hand, Laura felt extremely hopeless due to her physical and psychological deficiencies, and the huge gap between her ideals and reality made her hold a negative and pessimistic attitude towards life. Therefore, when facing Jim, Laura dared not express her feelings and was afraid of being rejected. The communication between Jim and her was quite pleasant, and even Jim could not help but kiss Laura, which surprised her greatly. It seemed that she was also a Southern Belle with suitors at that moment, hoping to lead a happy and joyful life in the future. But upon learning that Jim was engaged, Laura was instantly pulled back to the cruel reality. The cold reality once again disappointed Laura with life, and the pressure from the Southern Belle values made it difficult for her to view herself reasonably. Such trauma made Laura lock herself in her own world. She also hoped to marry a gentleman like Jim, just like an elegant southern lady, but it was precisely these deeply ingrained values that brought excessive inferiority complex and trauma to her. She knew that she was unable to meet her mother's expectations and was powerless to resist. Her heart was filled with anxiety and helplessness and she realized that her love and marriage dreams had been shattered and was further hurt.

A Southern Belle is expected to suppress their emotions and desires and become dignified and appropriate women. Under the influence of these values, Laura has become accustomed to suppressing her true thoughts and feelings. She has a special affection for Jim, but she dare not express it actively and can only bury this emotion deep in her heart. When she learned that Jim was engaged, she silently endured the pain and chose to return to her closed world instead of fighting or expressing her disappointment. It was the Southern Belle Value of being a lady and marrying a gentleman that made Laura suffer from trauma.

Conclusion

For the reason that Amanda and Laura were deeply influenced by the Southern Belle Values, they suffered a lot and these miserable memories brought them terrible trauma. Amanda always indulged herself in her days when she was still a popular Southern Belle with many suitors and attributed her misfortune to the failure of her

marriage. Her irresponsible husband and the abysmal marriage brought trauma to Amanda. At the same time, she tried to make her daughter Laura a Southern Belle, because in her view, a girl could only lead a happy life if she was a Southern Belle. However, it is these Southern Belle Values she constantly inculcated into her daughter that made Laura even more diffident and the misery caused by failing to be an ideal Southern Belle made Laura suffer a lot from trauma.

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