

Breaking Of Illusion: A Journey of Symbolic Realism to Expressionism in Tennessee William's The Glass Menagerie

Sukanta Roy

Introduction

Amanda, Tom and Laura, all three characters from the play *The Glass Menagerie* are living in the self-constructed illusionary cocoon of their respective worlds yet separated from each other's interests. While Amada is living in the receding Southern glory of the America in the late thirties, Tom is trying to escape in the new modern pleasures entertainment industry to get far away from his own failure, and Laura, being shy and confidenceless creates her own fantasy world to find comfort and sustainability amid hopelessness. Rapidly changing socio-economic landscape of America of the thirties did not allow the luxury and the comforts of fantasy and therefore the conflict between the modern realism and the comfortable escapism destroyed many houses and hopes. The emotional turmoil and hopeless existence are the realistic portrayals which may, in a different way, seem a little bit exaggeration. Amanda's eloquence, Tom's unprecedented eagerness for modern entertainment and Laura's extraordinary shyness actually refers to an Expressionistic view of life to emphasize as well as criticize the American life of the thirties, especially in the South.

It is believed that the South had the best aristocratic sophistication in terms of mannerism, lavish lifestyle and flouting of riches made from huge plantations across various Southern States. The kind of pride and glory Southerners had about their culture could be compared with the Showing off of contemporary fashion in the Hide Park of England. However, after the Industrialization of the Northern part of America, by means of financial prospect the North had started to compete the South and gradually overshadowed it. The economic boom and the consequent cultural changes the North

Witnessed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was unimaginable in the South. As if the strife of American Civil War (1861-1865) and the resultant idealistic separation of North versus South kept on in the psyche of the Americans. It was happy in its own lavishing glory and never wanted to experience the changes the rest of the world was bringing which the North was very much a part of. It was still languishing in its own culture of aristocracy. The abolition of slavery (1865), Civil Rights Movement (1950s – 1960s), the Underground Railway, the migration of black people from the South to the North – had changed the socio-economic condition of the South. Yet the pride and glory of the past "good old days" made the Southerners ignore the fact. When the First World War occurred, though America didn't participate directly, economic recession throughout the world was also felt in America. When the Great Depression, started from 1920s and continued up to 1930s, the South became the greatest victim of it. Jerome Blum in his *The European world: a History*, claims that the Industrialization fell (-) 46% and Unemployment rose up to 607% during the Great Depression.

In *The Glass Menagerie* Amanda is the representative of that receding glorious past of the South. While she is the victim of unchanging South, the old pride does not let her believe it completely so. She has to manage her household by little money her son, Tom earns from a company, while she desperately seeks to earn some extra money by selling magazines. Laura, having a small disability issue and being extremely shy, fails in all of her attempts of success including her education. Amanda finds that for Laura the only way to do something in her life is by marrying somebody. Yet

her shyness is even preventing her from finding someone suitable. While the Southern aristocratic sophistry enables Amanda to talk eloquently and thereby engaging the audience in a bubbling atmosphere of superior artistic magnanimity Laura's shyness symbolizes the reality of Amanda's hollowness. After the economic disaster of the South, Laura's portrayal is emblematic of Southern reality, which is hobbling and shying away from its own shadow while some of the people like Tom and Jim are desperately trying to disentangle and assimilate them to the modern life that has already taken a leap. What Laura cannot do, Amanda tries to make it up on behalf of her, in her own ways. However, her ways are not modern or quite old, which once had glory and importance yet in the present harsh world of realities those flirtatious behaviours, eloquence and sophistication seem clownish. The decoration and preparation for the "gentleman caller" is the creation of fake fantasy world only to lure a husband for Laura. Those sophistications are almost two times removed from reality – one, that it was not the "good old days" any more, and the modern time does not value those sophistications, second, that they have become so poor that those sophistications seem ironically self-destructive. In the practical sense, being removed from reality, those sophistications failed to schematize Amanda's wish successfully. Amanda does not want to believe that the time has changed and those schemes have become obsolete. She still lives in the old glory of the South whereas she has, by the meantime, lost her own age and glory. By creating the fantasy world through decorations, food dishes and other preparations Amanda creates an Illusion where she wants everyone else to fit in. Charles S. Watson writes in his essay "The Glass Menagerie": The Passing of Good Manners" that in the Library Edition of the play Amanda complains about the crowd in a church where she cannot stand the Northerners because they are rude. She says, "These Northern Episcopalians! I can understand the Southern Episcopalians, but these Northern ones, no" (75). In the same edition we see that when she meets Jim, for the first time the screen image

shows "Amanda as a girl" and later Tom says that she is looking pretty. The deception she wants to create and the substitution she is playing for Laura is disturbing and out of place. The image here is nevertheless a sturdy one which neither belongs to the actual nineteenth century south nor the modern one. It is a desperate attempt of a romantic but frustrated mother who is trying her best in every possible way to find a match for her daughter.

Tom, on the other hand, being unsuccessful and not being able to live up to his dream of success, escapes in the film and entertainment world. His world of illusion is so dark that he cannot even create a fantasy, but watches the same film again and again to keep himself away from his family problems and personal problems. He not only tries to escape the harsh reality that he has an unmarried sister, towards whom he needs to be a responsible brother to find a suitable match, but also he tries to escape from the entire scenario by running away from home. His dream to go somewhere and work for ships so that he can earn a considerable amount of money to become rich and to lead a comfortable life has been nothing but another illusion of life. Pursuing his dream he does not pay the electric bill and therefore the sudden cut of electricity and consequent darkness during Jim's visit anticipates the impending darkness in their lives.

Laura creates another fantasy world where nothing is real. The glass menagerie is the extreme separation from reality. She lives in her own fantastic world where she retreats every time she feels out of comfort zone. Her room, her shyness, her retirement from all social positions, including all kinds of educations, indicates her detachment from real world. Having lack of confidence she feels threatened from the real world and to compensate that she creates one of her own. Her glass menagerie contains even mythical creature like unicorn, a perfect example of detachedness. She languishes in her room and does not even want to go out. She has no one to talk to except herself and that is what she does. She creates other selves of her and then those fictional characters become more real than the real ones. She does not allow

anyone to invade her own fantastic little world. She not only finds solace there but a sense of importance or may be a sense of achievement and admiration that she has always wanted but never received. This is why her crush, Jim, when praises her and admires her, she let him enter into the 'realm' of her own world, into the world of menagerie. She easily trusts him and shares her fantasy world.

The more powerful Laura creates her illusionary world the more pain it would create while the illusion breaks. The menagerie is made of glass and we know that they are fragile. She herself is as fragile as those glass toys. When Tom mistakenly breaks some of the toys the approaching danger has been knocking at her little door of fantasy world. Tom has brought Jim and she has trusted Jim. While sharing her secrets step by step she takes Jim into the deeper space of her emotion. When they have kissed it was the climax of emotional illusion in the play yet this was the breaking of Laura's shyness. She has demolished her negativity, shyness and lack of confidence and has thought that she has found what she has been searching throughout her life. However the breaking of her 'self' does not go too well and the happiness she has enjoyed for a moment shatters quickly. Jim announces that the kiss was a mistake and he has been betrothed to someone else and therefore he breaks all her newly formed dreams of becoming a real person after destroying her previous shy self. She has been, then, almost forced to retire to her old self of passivity and reserved character. This is not the end of the disasters in her life. Jim has broken the horn of the unicorn. This is the example of symbolic representation of dragging a fantasy dweller into the reality of life where she would not get the usual comfort, coziness and relief. Laura's favourite is the unicorn and we can understand that the creator of her own fantasy would match her non-reality with the unreal character. The breaking of the horn makes it look like a horse which symbolizes the erasure of fantasy and implantation of reality. When Jim asks that unicorns are not real, hence what

purpose can it serve; Laura's answer provides us the distinctions between real and non-real/unreal world.

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 it does, he doesn't complain about it. He stays on a shelf with some horses that won't have horns and all of them seem to get along nicely together.

(Williams: np)

This conversations sums up Laura's condition not from the outside and what other people see her as, but rather from inside, what she thinks her own position is. She is like the unicorn, who is a misfit in this 'non-mythical' world of realities where the living means one has to accept the reality as reality. There is nothing called in-between or alternative reality. However she likes to live in a fantasy world but the world would not accept her in that way. The person like Jim, who has been convinced that the main stream life style of reality is the only reality, and they, being agents of that reality, would try to explain the others about the benefit of conforming into the norms. The world of the unicorn in the shelf of Laura is safe and secure but without normal future. It has been living a parallel life of myth, like Laura is living a parallel life which is actually different from the reality. Jim's intervention in the Amanda's household is like a gambling choice. If he fits in he would have been a part of the fantasy world which is running there. But he is different and actually belongs to somewhere else. He, being different has become a threat to her world unknowingly. The breaking of horn of the unicorn makes the unicorn looks like a horse. As Laura points out that this new broken unicorn cum horse would "get along nice together" with the other horses. Similarly having broken world of fantasy and belief the new broken Laura would have to get along nicely together with other people who do not belong to the fantasy world of illusion. Here the

Symbolic change in her life is toward the crude realism.

Tom, on the other hand, tries his best to stay out of responsibility and to escape in the world of entertainment. However he also loves Laura and tries to bring a "gentleman caller" by obeying his mother. Though he already has a plan to leave the house, the tragedy he hurled at Luara, though unknowingly, would haunt him forever. His plans of leaving the house for his own better future tells us that without hurting others and getting hurt, no one can break the illusion of life for better financial success. We would never know whether the choice is worthy, or whether he would get happiness in future but this guilt of abandoning the family when he has been needed the most would never let him live in peace. We also do not know whether Amanda would ever be happy in her life. After the financial investment for the "gentleman caller" Jim goes wasted, when she would find that his only son, the only earning member of the family has abandoned them just like her husband, when she would find out that Tom left them in further misery by not paying the electricity bill and the line has been cut, when she would understand how much damage the incident has done to Laura, her bubbling sophistication and the unreal conversation possibly would cease to exist. No one can have stopped the incident because Tom has been unaware about Jim's upcoming marriage. Yet when Jim leaves shattering the hopes for Laura and thereby hopes for Amanda too, Amanda starts to lose her temper and shouts like a hysteric. She has been trained to be sophisticated so much that we never see her lose her temper. But this time she breaks all the illusion like the "Lady of Shalott" comes out of the illusionary world and breaks the mirror of deception to find that her life has come to an end. Here the curse has been already there that the Southern culture has been dying and she being a representative of that culture cannot escape that. The final blow to that illusion comes through Jim's intervention. All the world of illusion in the household of Amanda breaks and they are left with hopelessness.

The way the representation of the breaking of an illusionary world has been shown, the way Amanda is extremely out of place in the modern world of crude reality, it is somewhere a bit exaggerating. Yet throughout the narrative all the works of all the characters never seem out of place. The changing of the world and worldview is the real culprit in this incident. However Amanda's extreme sophistication is needed to show for the play in order to contrast it with the stark reality outside. The extremity of the emotions in the play makes them to show expressionistic attitude. In the essay "Refractory Visions: The Contours of Literary Expressionism" Ralph Freedman claims that Expressionism is like an "underground" style of heightened romanticism" (59). Indeed Amanda's speech seems a romantic journey towards the best nineteenth century Southern life. Freedman writes about the Expressionistic writers:

The expressionistic poets we have examined thought of themselves as diametrically opposed to naturalism. They refused to accept the "objective" conception of reality. They equally rejected the pure analysis of the soul, cultivated in symbolist writing. Rather, the world must be distorted to reveal its inner meaning. (Freedman: 62)

Expressionism wants to reveal the innermost emotion and not the external reality. Here in *The Glass Menagerie* by breaking the emotions the conflicts of all the characters emerge as the most important phenomena. All the characters want to live in their respective fantasy world yet the harsh reality breaks all and finally their inner selves reveal. Amanda turns out to be almost a hysteric, Tom a selfish but guilty dreamer, and Laura a shy non-achiever. Expressionism wants to represent and emphasize the inner reality through showing of excess emotion. Here all the characters use the excess emotion, whether it is to be expressive in eloquent 'romantic' speeches to entrap Jim, or to constantly and irritatingly escaping into entertaining film, or being excessively shy and not being able to do anything – all are crossing through, in a way, extremities of life. This is the example of expressionism in symbolic level where the

characters take journey from fantasy world to a real world, rather forcefully. The journey is not necessarily a smooth one, but often a harsh and crude where the characters are forced to submit themselves against their will. The world probably does not value the fantasy and after the Great Depression, America was in a state where it could not afford fantasy and romanticism any more. One has to work harder and harder to get the 'depressed' country and 'depressed' humanity out of it and in the process if one person or the other fails, or becomes a hysteric or living dead like Laura, the nobody would care about that person, because everybody would be busy to fit in and find a normative 'success'. Besides, in the changing scenario no one can stop the time, not even Amanda's magical eloquence. Hence the disaster of the family has been inevitable. The destruction of the dreams is waiting to be done by some external forces as it would come and break the fragile family like Jim has done by breaking the horn of the unicorn. It too must happen mistakenly because there is nobody to blame to as if the circumstances have played the game of fate.

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