

To Defeat “Blue Devils”: the Intertextual Study of The Glass Menagerie and The Night of Iguana

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Abstract

Tennessee Williams was an American 20th-century Southern dramatist. *The Glass Menagerie* and *The Night of Iguana* are two of his well-known plays, which explore how people can find help and hope in the illusion of life in order to return to reality and regain freedom. Based on the theory of intertextuality, this paper explores the themes of escape and salvation between the two plays to reveal the intrinsic connection between them.

Keywords

Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Night of Iguana*, intertextuality.

1. Introduction

Tennessee Williams, one of the greatest American dramatists, wrote various touching plays. His best five plays include *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *The Night of the Iguana* and *The Rose Tattoo*. The aim of the paper is to give new light on the research of *The Glass Menagerie* and *The Night of Iguana* by interpreting them from the perspective of intertextuality, in hope of proving that the Wingfields fail to resolve their problems, that is, living in illusions, and Williams provides them an effective way to resolve their problems by creating the character Hannah in *The Night of Iguana*, which is also instructive for readers to defeat their own “blue devils” and to brave the harsh world in which they live.

The term “intertextuality” was first proposed by the French literary critic Julia Kristeva. According to Charles E. Bressler, intertextuality is “a term denoting that any given text’s meaning or interpretation is related or interrelated to the meaning of all other texts, and no text can be interpreted in isolation, and all texts are intertextual” [1]. The term attempts to signify the various ways in which one literary work is composed of other literary works or texts, either by its implicit or explicit allusions, citations, repetitions, and transformations of the formal and substantive features of another texts, or its participation in the common stock of linguistic and literary conventions and procedures that are “always already” in place [2].

There are many approaches of intertextuality, the most common are quotation, allusion, archetype, collage, transformation, imitation, parody, reversal, etc. Different approaches produce different intertextual works. It’s not hard to see that there are some common elements and similar structures in the two plays. To find out those common elements help readers to better understand and interpret these two plays. From the perspective of intertextuality theory, this paper hopes to prove that Williams provides characters in *The Glass Menagerie* with effective methods to defeat their own “blue devils” by presenting the character Hannah in *The Night of Iguana*.

2. Literature Review

Studies about the intertextuality between these two plays are rare. Some studies focus on the intertextuality of *The Glass Menagerie*, Xiao Xue, for example, interprets the play from the perspective of intertextuality to reveal characters’ inner world to show the negative influence brought by industrialization [3]. Other studies interpret the play from various perspectives,

including the trauma theme, the theme of escapism, characters analysis, family writing, as well as the influence brought by the loss of the father. In addition, there are some studies compare the play with Williams's another famous play *A Streetcar Name Desire*. Xu Jing, for instance, claims that both Amanda and Blanche are victims of the conflicts between the antebellum Southern culture and the northern industrialism [4].

Domestic studies about *The Night of Iguana* are relatively rare. Li Lin, from the perspective of spatial criticism, analyzes the play's heterogeneous space [5]. ZhouGui Shiyang interprets the play from the perspective of female discourse construction and allegory imaginary to reveal Williams's reflection on desire, death and love [6]. Though domestic studies about *The Glass Menagerie* are highly developed, there are few studies interpreting the play from the perspective of intertextuality. *The Night of Iguana*, on the other hand, needs more attention from researchers.

3. Textual Analysis

Most of Williams's plays deal with problems of the "lost" individual in an industrial and "mechanized" society and reveal the raw tensions between the progressive industrialization and the traditional agriculture. His plays vividly reveal the brutality of American cities, the destruction of modern people's reason, the fragmentation of individuals, and the vagaries of life. *The Glass Menagerie* reveals the dark side of ordinary people's inner self in modern society, who feel lonely, confused and desperate and who try to escape from reality and indulge in their memories or illusions. The theme of *The Night of Iguana*, as Williams himself proposed, is "about how to live in despair and keep living." Like many of Williams's plays, the play is profoundly human, full of sexual dilemmas and mental breakdowns.

3.1. Similar choices made by Fred and Tom

One theme of the two plays displays characters' escape from reality, i.e. Fred in *The Night of Iguana*, Tom's father and Tom himself in *The Glass Menagerie*. All of them escape to their ideal world, mostly is natural world. Fred, the husband of Maxine, keeps fishing night and day. He goes night-fishing, and when Maxine gets up the next day, he is preparing to go out fishing again. Fishing is all his life and he would not do nothing except that. Indulging in fishing, he cares about nothing and constantly ignore his wife, who is discontented and hopes to draw her husband attention by going night-swimming with her diving-boys. Strangely, Fred would throw the fish back in the sea. He even requests to be dropped in the sea after he died. The reason why Fred always goes to fishing is unknowable. It seems that he tries to find something meaningful in fishing and in the sea after he finds his life is full of boredom. Then he indulges in fishing after seeking some solace, realizing that the sea can bring him a sense of relief. Actually, fishing is a way of Fred to retreat from the real world. From the sea, as a symbol of nature, he forgets the existence of reality and flings himself into nature.

Tom, similarly, feeling depressed in his own home, chooses to go to cinema almost every night, for he obsesses in adventures, which he cannot experience in order to work in warehouse to support his family. Tom loves to write poems too, which is also incompatible with his job. Aspiring to become a sailor, he pays his dues to become a member of "The Union of Merchant Seamen" instead of the light bill, which causes the lights in his home go out. Home means reality for Tom, in which he has to do things he doesn't enjoy, i.e. suffering from his mothers' constant complaint, engaging in a boring job. While traveling means relief for Tom, during which he can leave the harsh reality behind. Tom, being in a dilemma between his family and his dream, finally escapes from his home and to travel. Then he abandons his family like his father and pursues his dream too.

Both Fred and Tom fail to face the harsh reality and choose to abandon their family. On the one hand, they share similar experience, that is, they are discontented with reality. Though suffering from agony, they never make any effort to change reality (which may seem unrealizable for them). Then they choose to escape from it and abandon their family. In addition, when they discover reality is intolerable, both of them choose to solve problems by themselves instead of seeking help. They walk out of their family and go to the outside world in which they hope to seek solace. On the other hand, there also are some differences between these two characters. Fred's and Tom's destination are different, the former obsesses in fishing, while the latter chooses to travel from cities to cities, which respectively represent natural world and human world. Moreover, the results of their escape are different too, for Fred finally gets himself into nature and successfully escapes from reality (although he died), while Tom cannot totally forget his family, especially Laura. It can be concluded that Williams conveys his attitude that nature can provide people solution to their problems, although such solution may seem ineffective for some people (for Fred loses his life).

3.2. Desperation and Redemption of Shannon and Laura

Shannon and Laura, the main focuses of the two plays, also escape from reality. Shannon has descended from being an ordained minister of the Church to a tour guide. He cracks up in Maxine's hotel, which he often does there. Though Maxine called for doctor when Shannon cracked up before, it is useless, for Shannon's real problem isn't solved. According to Shannon, his nervous breakdown is caused by a "Spook", a phantasm created by his own anxieties. However, for Shannon, he cannot find someone who is willing to help him to defeat his "Spook" but Hannah. Through a heart-to-heart conversation about belief, purpose, and desire, during which Hannah exposed that she had fought against her "blue devils", and told Shannon that understanding between people and a wanting to help each other may help him eventually. In the end of the play, Shannon sets the iguana free, which serves as a symbol of Shannon's relief of suffering.

Laura, being slightly crippled, possesses inferiority complex, which makes her terribly shy. She cannot go to college like other students and has no choice but stays in home every day. All her family lives in illusions and she cannot find someone to help her. She doesn't bother to ask help for anyone but to indulge in her collections of glass. Jim's arrival, however, changes everything. Jim, as a representative of reality, discovers that Laura is so self-contempt, which he used to be too. He then also tries to help Laura walk out her own world and face reality through a heart-to-heart conversation. In the end of the play, Laura gives her unicorn horn to Jim as a souvenir, which implies that Laura realizes that she should move from her illusions to reality, which is not as terrifying as she believes. And Amanda chooses to face reality too, which is in a sharp contrast with her glorious past.

Laura and Shannon share a similar experience: they feel confused about their life and have nothing to do but escape. Then they accidentally receive help from others, who share similar experience with them. For Hannah, she had her own "blue devils" too, and she has fought against with it by herself and successfully escaped from it. For Jim, he felt self-contempt too, but he sought a way to be confident, i.e. to study public speaking. Shannon is helped by Hannah, who tells him that endurance is key element to defeat his "spooks", who also informs him that everything has its shadowy side and that Shannon should forgive himself first before others forgive him. Laura is helped by Jim, who gives her courage to walk out of her "glass menagerie" and face the harsh reality.

3.3. Intertextuality of *The Glass Menagerie* and *The Night of Iguana*

Williams sets similar predicaments for the characters in these two plays, and then he provides them with different solutions. On one hand, for Fred and Tom, who cannot face reality anymore, they can go to outside world or nature to seek solace, but they had to give up something, since

reality is not compatible with their solace. That's why they abandon their family. On the other hand, for Shannon and Laura, who previously suffer from anxiety and then retreat from reality and live in their own illusionary world, Williams creates two characters, Hannah and Jim, who live in reality, to bring Shannon and Laura back to reality, which also conveys Williams's compassion for those who, desperately and helplessly, live in their own illusions.

The endings of these two plays coordinate with each other, for the characters' endings in these two plays are slightly different. Williams, obviously, sets a relatively happy ending for Shannon. Hannah, serves as the moral center of the play, helping Shannon release from the shackle in his heart. The conversation between Shannon and Hannah widely exposed to issues of repentance, atonement, God, suffering, love, etc. Hannah tries to enlighten him with her own philosophy of life, pointing out that the root of his pain is loneliness, and that people should break through their barrier and understand and empathize with each other.

However, the ending of *The Glass Menagerie* is ambiguous. With the abrupt leave of the gentleman caller Jim, Amanda's second plan for Laura fails too. And then she has a quarrel with Tom, who abandons her and Laura after that. However, it is noticeable that Laura, after the interaction with Jim, is different from the Laura before. When the glass of unicorn accidentally breaks, she consoles Jim that "Maybe it's a blessing in guise", which means that she realizes that she is as the same as others and she would pluck up her courage to go out of her own world and go into reality. Such implications, however, cannot be considered as a happy ending, for Tom abandons his family but is still haunted by his family. In addition, it is not easy for Laura and Amanda to find a stable job like men to support themselves, and their future is full of uncertainty. Failing to ask for external help, the Wingfields fight against their illusions by themselves. Their self-struggle, however, is proved to be ineffective. The intertextuality between these two plays can be clearly seen then, for the unresolved problem in *The Glass Menagerie* is finally resolved in *The Night of Iguana*. Through Hannah's experience of defeating her own "blue devils", Williams answers the question that "How one can be helped and saved from his or her illusions?" His answer is told by Hannah, that is, "to believe in something or in someone-almost anyone-almost anything...something" [7], and "a little understanding exchanged between them, a wanting to help each other through nights like this [7]." By keeping faith in something and walking out to communicate with others, one is believed to rescue himself from illusions and anxieties, just as Shannon does.

The Night of Iguana is considered as Williams' last successful work, and in many ways it's a companion to his very first success, *The Glass Menagerie*. They can be considered as Williams's semi-autobiographical plays. Both display a poetic lyricism detailing a central character, much like Williams himself, who yearns to escape his tormented existence. They reflect his own life experiences and escape tendencies, and they both describe similar plotline, that is, the characters first experience a period of agony and self-escape, and then a "hero" or "heroine" appear and rescue them. Though nearly 30 years apart, both plays share a preoccupation with the notion of escape and the conflict between reality and illusions.

4. Conclusion

Through analyzing the theme of escapism and salvation in these two plays, the paper concludes that there is connectivity between them, for Williams finally answers his question that he set in *The Glass Menagerie*. In addition, the paper reveals the relationship of inheritance and development between the two plays by interpreting them from the perspective of intertextuality. The ending of *The Night of Iguana* reflects Williams's relatively optimistic thought on lonely and despair, that is, it is advisable for those who live in their illusions to walk out of their self-enclosed worlds by communicating with others and seek for others' help, which is, naturally, useful for readers who live in anxieties.

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