

The Analysis of the Thirdspace of the Glass Menagerie

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Abstract

The Glass Menagerie, a masterpiece by Tennessee Williams, depicts the life of the lower middle class from the South, who came to the North for a living in the context of the Great Depression. The Southern women, Amanda and Laura, portrayed by Tennessee Williams in The Glass Menagerie, embody the Southern ladies' escape from the cruel reality and their remembrance and nostalgia for the Southern society and tradition. This article employs Edward W. Soja's perspective of Thirdspace, to analyze the decline of traditional Southern culture in The Glass Menagerie and Laura 's awakening as a new generation of southern women who tried to build spiritual sanctuary in the hybridity of North and South American culture.

Keywords

Tennessee Williams; The Glass Menagerie; Thirdspace; American Southern culture.

1. Introduction

Tennessee Williams is one of America's most famous playwrights, who has contributed American literature with his 25 full-length plays and numerous short plays. His most well-known plays, which bring him enormous fame on a global scale, are nostalgic and elegiac, including *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. He has received two Pulitzer Prizes and four New York Drama Critic Circle Awards since *The Glass Menagerie*'s December 1944 premiere. Williams' inventive "plastic plays" have captured the attention of American theatrical reviewers and audiences alike. Williams has achieved great success in Hollywood films and has established himself as a legendary figure in both real life and literary history.

The Wingfield family consisted of four people: mother Amanda, son Tom, daughter Laura who was described as limp, and father, who had cheerfully left the family sixteen years prior. Tom is a miserable employee who struggles to find calm at home, where he fights with his mother all the time. Tom says he's bringing a friend from the warehouse, which makes Amanda happy. It turns out to be Jim O'Connor, Laura's high school crush. At that night, Jim speaks with her, gives her reassurance with his warmth, and ends with a kiss. Sadly, Jim has been engaged to someone else. And Tom left his family not long after that night.

Academic interest in *The Glass Menagerie* has been extensive and highly regarded. Through an examination of Williams's private letters and unpublished materials, the earlier biographical study, which started in the 1950s and peaked in the 1960s, has continued to gain momentum to this day. In addition, academics have started analyzing the plays and have written books and articles from the viewpoints of feminism, Marxism, LGBT studies, psychology, comparative literature, and character studies, among other fields. They have contributed fresh viewpoints and ideas. In character studies, Gulshan Rai Katerina studied female characters in Tennessee Williams's plays and published her findings in *The Face of Eve: A Study of Tennessee Williams's Heroines* [1]. She draws attention to the fact that every one of Williams's female characters lives on the periphery of society or is tormented by an aberrant inner life. This book examines women's roles and makes the argument that Williams's early experiences with marginalized women inform his writing on them. Bert Cardullo writes "The Blue Rose of St. Louis: Laura,

Romanticism, and *The Glass Menagerie*” in *Tennessee Williams Annual Review* [2]. According to this article, Laura possesses traits of romanticism from the 19th century. The industrialization, overcrowding, and impersonalized urban life of the West torment her sensitive self. The article concludes by mentioning Tom and suggesting that romanticism is also present in his ambition to be a seaman on a ship. Laura and Tom are romanticists, emphasizing the fulfillment of the spiritual realm, whereas Jim embodies the traits of realism and aspires to fame and fortune.

In the 1970s, China started studying Tennessee Williams and his writings. His studies at the time were primarily concerned with translation, *A Streetcar Named Desire*'s poetic language, and character analysis. Studies on Williams and his plays have advanced to a new level in the twenty-first century. Scholars began to take an interest in study on *The Glass Menagerie* theme gradually around 1990. The research on *The Glass Menagerie* that has been done thus far in Chinese academia can be categorized into the following areas: theme research, character research, autobiographical research, sculptural theater, and psychological research. In terms of character analysis, Li Li examines how Amanda and Laura are portrayed in Williams's plays. She discovers that Amanda and Laura share a tendency to initially present themselves as frail southern ladies, until their awareness of women's issues begins to develop [3]. Du Yanchun and Li Yunmi deem that Tennessee Williams depicts the image of a lady deeply influenced by southern culture, exposes the shackles of traditional southern culture on these women, and has tried to find a way to pursue happiness [4].

By employing the methods of textual close reading and cultural research, this article resorts to Thirdspace, presenting the social and cultural issues of the United States at the context of the Great Depression, and women's awakening.

2. Thirdspace of Edward Soja

Edward W. Soja is a famous postmodern geographer in contemporary America. On the basis of previous studies, Soja found that the critical traditional theory is confined to the relationship between human history and time, but neglects the attention to space. Therefore, Soja has made great achievements in putting forward the three-dimensional dialectics of space, society and history, affirming and developing the ontology of space. He mainly explained his views on space and social relations from two dimensions of theory and experience, and his theory innovated the traditional way of spatial thinking. He believes that space is not a simple material space. It embodies both social phenomena and political and cultural phenomena. Its space theory enriches the pluralistic, open and dynamic space connotation.

In Edward Soja's *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*, Firstspace is "the real", Secondspace is "the imagined" and the exploration of Thirdspace can be described and inscribed in journeys to "real and imagined places" [5]. Where does the Thirdspace exist? It exists where the past and the future, the actual and the imagined, the tangible and the intangible meet. The concept of "thirdspace" is less about a physical location and more about a way of life and thought process. It involves accepting and realizing the inevitability of imperfection, contradiction, and fragmentation in reality, as well as the complexity, self-contradiction, and incoherence of human desires as they relate to the real world. The Thirdspace is a method of thinking that embraces ambiguity and encourages change. Thus, the Thirdspace is defined in this article as a mode of thinking, an inclusive reality from one opposition to another opposition that encompasses imagination and reality as well as the act of traveling back and forth, all of which combined create a new dimension of space.

3. The Disillusioned Secondspace

The Glass Menagerie, the cinema, where Tom goes, and the park, where Laura escapes from school, are essentially secondspace. According to Soja, the secondspace is the space of spiritual imagination, the main space of utopian thinking, the space of semioticians or interpreters, and the space of pure creative imagination of some artists and poets. Because of the imagination of its ontology, cinemas and parks are destined to be disillusioned in reality.

Tom is a worker in a shoe factory. He worships Lawrence, loves writing poetry, longs for excitement and adventure, wants to be a sailor and pursues freedom, which represent his pursuit of possibility and his resistance to the shackles of reality. But on the other hand, real life is like a coffin which imprisoned him. He must temporarily put all this aside and become the existence of being for others. He needs to bear the responsibility of supporting his family, so he has to do the work he does not like. In addition, he must endure the strong mother's control over him. For Amanda, Tom is an abnormal, rebellious son. For Tom, Amanda is a powerful mother obsessed with illusions. When he expressed his desire for instinct, his mother said "Man is by instinct! Don't quote instinct to me! Instinct is something that people have got away from! It belongs to animals! Christian adults don't want it!" and "Superior things! Things of the mind and spirit! Only animals have to satisfy instincts!" [6]

Sartre's existentialist philosophy emphasizes that man is free, isolated, and becomes the other under the gaze of others. The existence of others is the alienation of human beings and the deprivation of human subjectivity. Tom wanders between the two identities, becoming the son of the Winfield family and provoking the family burden; while resisting Amanda's expectations, yearning to become a real free man. Tom trapped in it was tortured, and the uneasiness in his heart made him unable to be calm for a long time. So, he can only grasp himself in the illusory world without others, seek a moment of peace, get rid of family responsibility in the film, paralyze himself through smoking and drinking, and often do not return home at night.

Amanda first enrolled in a typing course for Laura, hoping that Laura could learn a skill and support herself independently. As a result, she was greeted with a frustrating failure. Laura is afraid of the cruel competition of the society. She vomits at the thought of the exam and is eventually eliminated by the school. The inferiority complex urges Laura to take an evasive attitude when facing the tasks of study and career. However, Laura's inferiority complex is the result of multiple factors. First of all, Laura has a deep sense of inferiority due to her physical disability. At the same time, her father's absence leads to family disfunction, which makes her lack of self-confidence and social interest in social interaction and intimate relationship. In addition, the decline of agricultural civilization in the south and the bad economic situation during the Great Depression aggravated her survival anxiety in industrial civilization. Under the influence of these factors, Laura loses her sense of self-worth, chooses to escape from the society, and seek for building a spiritual sanctuary.

4. The Diverse Thirdspace

The Glass Menagerie is an Alef-style space, which is a space that writes the memory, present and future of American southerners. This is a completely open space and a thirdspace full of social struggles.

There are obvious differences between the northern and southern cultures in American history. Southern culture is built on the basis of plantations, stable, simple, romantic and somewhat backward. Most of the southerners are descendants of the English aristocracy, so their culture shows the characteristics of decency, elegance and pleasure. Because too much pursuit of romantic, so that can not correctly face the reality. At the end of the 1820s, the United States Congress agreed that the South could save slaves. This decision made the southerners finally

set up the banner of independence and launched a civil war with the North for nearly five years. The civil war caused heavy losses in the south. In the change of the environment, the life of the southerners has undergone earth-shaking changes, and the southerners have different mentality. Some southerners face reality and adapt to the new environment; others escape from reality and live in remembrance of the past all the time.

Southern lady is the product of such special historical conditions. Under the plantation economy, they are the plantation owners with a large number of black slaves. They are the ruling class of society and the image of elegant and versatile. Southern lady, before marriage can have a lot of suitors, which can prove personal elegance and charm. Among the many suitors, such a lady will choose a gentleman to become a marriage partner. In order to be among the top of the society and to please men, southern ladies often become a model of obedience. However, the title of southern lady made women at that time happy to be bound by the various norms set by men for them, and they were willing to give their fate to the dominant men. However, with the outbreak of the Civil War and the defeat of the South, all the glitz was in vain. The plantation economy declined, and the southerners were dissatisfied with the reality and even escaped. Those southern ladies who once had unlimited scenery are difficult to accept reality and forget the past. They often indulge in memories of the past and fantasies about the future. They try to escape the miserable living situation and try to return to the original life, but they can not achieve these aspirations.

The Glass Menagerie shows a closed and traditional family in the American South in the 1930s. Amanda is addicted to the southern culture and unable to extricate herself. Like other southern ladies, she struggles in loneliness and poverty. She constantly recalls the past glory and warmth. Only in this way can she find a little comfort. At the same time, she also has unrealistic illusions about the future. She wants to reproduce the beauty of the past on her children. Therefore, Amanda constantly transmits this consciousness to her son Tom and daughter Laura. Amanda believes that if a girl wants to be happy, she must fight for it with a beautiful face. In the play, she repeatedly mentions to her children the beauty of her youth and the glorious deeds that have attracted many men. In order to match Jim and Laura, Amanda tells her daughter that "All pretty girls are a trap." [6] It can be seen that in Amanda 's thought, women can only find a way out of a happy life and marriage by relying on men. With the development of society, social contradictions have intensified, and real life has become more and more ruthless. The hope of people 's efforts is gradually dashed. Because of this, she kept working hard on her daughter and expected her to live a happier life.

Amanda is confined by the aristocratic culture, living in an era that is not their own. The aristocratic culture in the south makes the southern lady 's life attitude negative and passive. In their ideas, marriage is an important factor in women 's success. The success or failure of life depends entirely on the success or failure of marriage. After the industrial system of the north destroyed the culture of the south, they could not adapt to the new environment and strive to transform themselves into new people. Therefore, they cannot dominate their own destiny, and instead they are depressed. They are too fragile to withstand too many blows; they are too stubborn and unwilling to abandon outdated concepts.

Laura also has the typical characteristics of a southern lady, she is elegant and decent, kind and generous. She often sits on delicate chairs to wipe her ornaments, and she often lingers among the flowers. From this description, it is not difficult to see that Tennessee exudes a pure and elegant attachment to the Southern lady. At the same time, Tennessee also discovered the fragile nature of Southern women. Laura is afraid of the cruel competition of the society. When she thinks of the exam, she will vomit and eventually be eliminated by the school.

However, the arrival of Jim brings a signal of hope for Laura. As Jim pointed out to Laura, she has an inferiority complex, values herself too low and lacks confidence in life. Jim tells Laura that unlike others, there is no need to be ashamed. The world is full of ordinary people, and

everyone is very ordinary. Although “blue rose” is different from “weed”, there is nothing wrong with it. In the chat with Jim, Laura slowly realized that she was free and became cheerful and optimistic. Even if the beloved unicorn is broken, she does not cry as much as before. Instead, she comforts Jim optimistically. The unicorn made of glass always has a broken day, and says that this is a blessing due to misfortune. The unicorn without horns does not look so deformed. The change of attitude towards the broken unicorn reflects the change of Laura 's attitude towards reality. After the news of Jim 's engagement, Laura is not disappointed and sinks. She ' bit her trembling lips and then bravely smiled ' and gave the unicorn as a souvenir to Jim as she was ready to step into the real world. At the end of the play, Tom said: “for nowadays the world is lit by lighting! Blow out your candles, Laura!” [6], and then Laura blows out the candles out. It indicates Laura gradually changes from a person who passively accepts her own life to a person who actively chooses and creates herself and is ready to strive to realize her own value.

5. Conclusion

Tennessee Williams depicts the image of ladies deeply influenced by southern culture and exposes the constraints of traditional southern culture on these women. The thirdspace in *The Glass Menagerie* reflects a contradiction in the southern women. However, the advanced social system will inevitably replace the backward social system, which means the inevitability of the disappearance of the southern traditional culture. However, Laura, as a new generation of southern women, tries to obtain ideological liberation, return from the illusory self to the real self, gain independence, and get rid of the self-consciousness of the other.

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