

Disintegration and Reconstruction

--A Study of the Communities in The Glass Menagerie

Ye Fan

School of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China;

Abstract

The Glass Menagerie is a work by American playwright Tennessee Williams that "opens a new chapter in the history of Western theater". It tells the tragedy of an ordinary family's confrontation with the real society in the background of the Great Depression after the First World War. In this play, Williams follows the realistic principle and uses the symbol "the glass zoo" to signify the whole family in the play, which shows the fragility of the family community under the social background at that time, and also implies the possibility of community reconstruction. Through analyzing the community in The Glass Menagerie, the author explore reasons for the collapse of the community and the possibility of its reconstruction in the course of social development.

Keywords

The Glass Menagerie; Community; Disintegration; Reconstruction.

1. Introduction

The Glass Menagerie is an early work by Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), a renowned contemporary American realist playwright. It established Williams' position in the history of European and American literature. Seeing through Tom's memories, this play portrays a family's chaotic and broken life during the Great Depression of the 1930s — a mother reminiscing about former glories of her living in American South, a son seeking to escape from a meaningless life of pain, a daughter with a physical handicap addicted to the glass menagerie, and a father who has left the family to go far away. In such a family — absent father and over weary mother — they seem to be tired of each other, yet still remain concerned about each other. Their relationship is seemingly keeping aloof, but also linked together by their shared sense of 'family'. This is a tragic portrayal of a family, which reveals major social issues through daily life scenes, with the special attention paid to the fact that several times, this family-based 'community' has been dismantled and restructured. The study of the 'community' depicted in this drama is significant for exploring the construction of family community in the process of social development.

"The idea of community originated from ancient Greece, the purpose is to realize the city-state justice of 'common good'." [8]. The concept "community" refers to "the expression of an imagined sense of security and an imaginary spiritual home" [9], with the aim of "emphasizing the close relationship between people, the common spiritual consciousness and identity" [9]. With the development of social production, the meaning of community has also changed. Ferdinand Tönnies, a German sociologist, first introduced the concept of community into sociology in his book *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* published in 1887. He believed that community was bound by consanguinity, emotion and ethics. Its basic forms include consanguineous community, geographical community and spiritual community, in which spiritual community is the real community, so the perfect unity of human will is the theoretical starting point of community. From the practical point of view, Marx and Engels proposed that

the community should be a “union of free men”, that is, “In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” [4]. Therefore, from the perspective of “community”, this paper attempts to explore the connotation and practical significance of its disintegration and reconstruction in *The Glass Menagerie*.

Most academic papers on *The Glass Menagerie* explore the characters' characteristics or the play's themes from the perspective of symbolism or trauma. However, there are few papers discuss the issue of family breakdown and reconstruction in the play from the perspective of “community”. Although in the article, “Interconnection in Opposition: Singularity and Community and Their Cultural Meanings in *The Glass Menagerie*”, the author Huang Xingzhao mentions the concept of “community”, his interpretation of it is based on its oppositional relationship with singleness. Huang argues that Tennessee Williams expresses his self-consciousness through the unconventional duality between individuality and community. Huang suggests that Williams expresses his self-consciousness through the unconventional binary relationship between the singularity and the community. However, the article does not discuss the establishment of the community in the play. Ma Yufang and Zhu Shuhua use structural functionalism to analyze the negative impact of structural deficits in families on adolescents in their article “An analysis of Family Structure from the Perspective of Structural Functionalism: A Case Study of *The Glass Menagerie*” [6]. Although the idea of “family community” is implied in this paper, the focus is still to discuss the binary opposition between community and individual rather than the community itself. Therefore, this paper is going to explore the possibility of reconstructing disintegrated communities from the concept of 'community' itself.

2. The Collapse and Failure of the Traditional Family Community

The section headings are in boldface capital and lowercase letters. In the “Characters” section at the beginning of the play, Williams mentions only four characters—“mother, daughter, son, and the gentleman caller” [7], but Tom's opening monologue mentions that “there is a fifth character in the play who doesn't appear except in this large-than-life-size photograph over the mantle [7]”. Throughout the play, “the absence of the father makes it symbolized as 'the name of the father'” [1], the father never appears, but relies on the mother and her words, the photos on the wall, the phonograph and the record, etc., to repeatedly remind the existence of the concept of “father”. According to psychoanalytic theory, in the triangular family relationship between father, mother and child, father is the guarantee to maintain normal family relations. And if a child's sexual development is to proceed normally, each must pass through the castration complex, during this period, the father plays an important intermediary role. In *The Glass Menagerie*, the father runs away and in fact “cannot bear the responsibility of a father” [1]. The symbolic “name of the father” is only a symbol of the father and cannot play the full role of the father in the family, so the “father-mother-child” triangular family relationship of the Winfield family is actually unstable.

“According to the structural-functionalist view of the family, a complete family consists of both parents are essential to the health of the child” [6]. Therefore, in order to struggle to maintain this unstable structure, the mother Amanda paid double or even multiple times the effort to make up the function of the missing father. She is both the mother and the “father”, who has to support the whole family financially and nourish a son named Tom and a daughter named Laura spiritually. In order to make Laura independent, Amanda send her to a business school to learn typing, hoping that she could master a skill to support herself. However, due to the lack of father's love for a long time, Laura was insecure and emotionally fragile, and could not adapt to the social environment at school. At that time, it was difficult for women to survive on her own,

so in order to ensure Laura living a decent life without her or Tom, Amanda began to look for a good family for Laura, as she said, "Girls that aren't cut out for business careers usually wind up married to some nice man [7]." Before Laura settling down with someone, part of the responsibility for supporting the family naturally falls on Tom, which should be a father's responsibility. Tom didn't like his job at the warehouse, and Amanda knew it, but for the sake of family life, neither Tom nor Amanda could never let up for an instant. For Tom, who likes to write poems and wants to be "a lover, a hunter, a fighter" [7], the meaningless repetitive work in the warehouse without creativity is undoubtedly painful. He is the dream of life, but his mother needs a real life, so they quarrel frequently, the family community staying unstable all the time.

Amanda wants the family to be harmonious and stable as a mother and a "father", but her attempts to bind the community with blood and emotion have failed, and at every key moment, Amanda cannot bear all the responsibility alone. So It can be seen that the absence of her father is one of the reasons for the tragedy of the Wingfield and one of the factors for the collapse of this "family community". Amanda's actions, however, are all attempts to maintain and reconstruct the community destroyed by her father's departure, but they are still reconstruction based on the original foundation without making any changes, so they all end in failure.

3. Possibility of Community Reconstruction

Jim O'Connor is "a nice, ordinary, youngman" [7]. He is "the gentleman caller" [7] to the Wingfield, the friend in the warehouse who understands Tom and calls him "Shakespeare", and the Mr Right whom Amanda expects to be her daughter's husband. His visit seems to totally change the Wingfield from decoration to atmosphere, as the play shows that "a late spring evening which comes 'scattering poems in the sky", "a delicate lemony light is in the Wingfield apartment", and "the new floor lamp with its rose-like shade is in place, a colored paper lantern conceals the broken light-fixture in the ceiling" [7]. Everything shows the beautiful, warm and hopeful side of the family, at the same time, Jim came with the hope of the family. "The lights in both rooms flicker and go out" [7] after they having meals together. Jim gives the match lit the candle, and then the story between him and Laura begins, from here it can be seen that the "hope" represented by Jim is actually as unstable and weak as the candle, and the following plot also proves this. In the chat with Jim, Laura always unconsciously reveals self-abased emotions, but also show her fragile side to Jim —she showed Jim her glass collection and introduced the unique unicorn in it, which altogether symbol Laura herself. Encouraged by Jim's words, she gradually let go of her self-distrust. She believed that Jim would not break the glass unicorn, which is the beginning of believing that she is unique, innocent and beautiful like a glass unicorn and that she is worthy of love. So she began to accept herself, accept her imperfections — lame, sensitive, low self-esteem, And then she take Jim's hand and dance with him, when dancing, a new "Laura" is slowly built, so that after the unicorn is broken, she said, "It doesn't matter, maybe it is a blessing in disguise!" [7]. This sentence is in sharp contrast to the previous broken of the glass menagerie during the argument, in which Laura burst into tears. That shows Laura's growth, confidence building and gradually strong, she even said "I don't have favorites much. It's no tragedy, Freckles. Glass breaks so easily. No matter how careful you are" [7].

If the purpose of Jim's visit is to become Laura's husband, then this hope is undoubtedly dashed, but Tennessee let him bear the hope which is get the Wingfield from one broken community to another broken community, but to provide another possibility. As mentioned above, the real community should be a spiritual community, is a community where everyone is free to develop. Building a community certainly requires mutual assistance, but the first thing should be the independent and free development of self in it, so at the end of the drama, Tom walked down

the fire-escape for the last time to escape the painful life that bound him, and Laura blew out the candle lit by Jim's match, because she no longer needed to borrow the light of others, she herself was a unique and beautiful shining "blue rose".

4. Conclusion

Through Tom's memories, *The Glass Menagerie* narrates the family tragedy of the Wingfield, that is, the collapse of the family community. In the process of analyzing the play, this paper finds that this collapse comes from the absence of the father in the family. The absence of the father makes the family structure no longer complete, which causes psychological trauma to the mother Amanda, the daughter Laura and the son Tom to varying degrees. In order to maintain the fragile community stable, the mother has made various efforts but finally failed. Instead, Jim's visit gives the Wingfields hope, allowing each member of the family to see the possibility of constructing a new community. Starting from the concept of "community", the author finds that the hope brought by Jim is not stable, nor can it support the re-establishment of the community. What can truly reconstruct the community is the self-confidence and free development of each individual within the community, which is the feasible condition for the successful reconstruction of the community. This paper hopes to study the "community" in *The Glass Menagerie* and provide a feasible way to reconstruct the community in the social development.

References

- [1] He Fang: The Function of "the Name-of-the-Father" in *The Glass Menagerie*, *Foreign Language and Literature*, Vol. 26 (2010) No.3, p45-48.
- [2] Huang Ju: To the "Union of Free Men" : a Solution to the Crisis of Modernity, *Ningxia Social Sciences*, Vol. 231(2022) No.1, p.38-44.
- [3] Huang Xingzhao: Interconnection in Opposites: on Individuality and Community in *The Glass Menagerie* and Their Cultural Meanings, *Journal of Jingchu University of Technology*, Vol. 37(2022) No.4, p.61-66.
- [4] Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Foreign Languages Press, China 2020), p.27.
- [5] Li Yitian: Division and union from the perspective of Marxist ethics, *Ethics research*, Vol. 1(2023) No.5, p.30-38.
- [6] Ma Yufang, and Zhu Shuhua: An analysis of Family Structure from the Perspective of Structural Functionalism: A Case Study of *The Glass Menagerie*, *Drama Literature*, Vol. 421(2018) No. 6, p.91-95.
- [7] Williams Tennessee, Robert Duncan: *The Glass Menagerie* (New Directions Publishing, USA 2011), p.751-780.
- [8] Xu Ye: The Community View of Tönnies, Durkheim and Dewey: its Origin and Enlightenment, *Guizhou Social Sciences*, Vol. 388(2022) No. 4, p.116-121.
- [9] Zhang Zhimin, et al: Definition, Notation and Evolving--Literature Review of community, *Science and Management of Science and Technology*, Vol. 1(2010) No.10, p.14-20.