

Memory, Media, and Modernity in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*: A Twenty-first Century Perspective

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Abstract

This article explores how effectively Tennessee Williams in *The Glass Menagerie* uses 'memory' to add new dramatic elements by recounting historical occurrences, 'media' to accurately depict people's circumstances and an authentic picture of society, and 'modernity' through his characters that affected their lives in the play. In this study, a descriptive study design with a component of qualitative analysis is used to find out answers to three research questions based on "memory, media and modernity" in *The Glass Menagerie*, and get a credible solution to strengthen our arguments. The in-depth analysis reveals Williams' concerns about middle-class people, society, and the office's authority during this era of transition. Additionally, it underscores how *The Glass Menagerie* incorporates shards of memories, media, and modernity to exhibit a congenial depiction of a modern spirit that Williams shares with the common people and readers whose voices he intercepts. The article intends to see how far Williams accomplished his objectives in portraying the deterioration of values, culture, traditions, and socio-economic problems to bring new force and genre to American drama. The in-depth analysis is sufficient to deem the play a quintessential, play for readers of all ages, a "Plastic Glass" genre that blends the middle class, experiences, characters' displays, and cultures. Finally, the discussion proves that the new genre is enlivened by the common people and eternal survivors of the 21st century.

Keywords: memory, media, modernity, The Glass Menagerie, Tennessee Williams, American literature

1. Introduction

Thomas Lanier Williams, also referred to as Tennessee Williams, was born on March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi. His formative years and most of his life were full of suffering that had a profound effect on his plays. Williams, in *The Glass Menagerie*, interprets and presents a real picture of American society before its publication (1945). He wrote this play depicting critical conditions America and the world passed through after the Great Depression, internal conflicts, post World War-I, and just before the beginning of World War II; nevertheless, it was staged after the war. The play depicts the middle-class people's sufferings and socio-political conflicts in American society in the form of a 'memory play'.

After seventy-five years, Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* is still a favorite of new audiences and performers while maintaining its reputation as a masterpiece of American theater from the twentieth century that best captures the mood of the moment. Besides, it mourns the glorious past and feeds on the idea of progress served to people by authorities. Williams is one of the greatest exponents of American people, society, and culture. He takes into account all elements to confront its difficult ethos like psychology, middle-class people's predicaments, vivid portrayals of intensely tragic and psychologically distressed characters, sufferings, illusions, the deep rootedness of American values, profound trust the office assurance, etc. The intricate interplay between the England society and the New England (American) vibes of new conditions portrayed through presenting characters' memory, true facts of people and society disseminated through theatre media, general perceptions, and culture are a few of his dominant themes in the play *The Glass Menagerie*.

The majority of academics who have researched William's works have made an effort to psychologically assess the relationships between socio-economic, illusion, alienation, and contentious factors (Hoerl, 2007; Dokic, 2014; Hopkins, 2014; Locke, 1998; Perrin & Rousset, 2014; Sorabji, 2006; Tulving, 1985). The media have a crucial and advantageous role in bridging societal and governmental divides. People are also made aware of their rights and obligations, empowering them to exercise their civic responsibility. A few scholars revealed that literature and the media complement one another and operate best when used in tandem (Baker, 2017; Egginton and Wegenstein, 2007; Nair,

2020). Instead, this study builds on the concepts from earlier research and adds to them with more knowledge about the three components of “memory, media, and modernity” representation of Americans by using an extensive and interdisciplinary facilitating literary, societal, theatrical (media), modern, and diachronic references from the American age. The article reveals that Williams expresses concerns about middle-class people, society, and the office’s authority during this era of transition. It further explores how Williams portrays the harsh reality of people’s lives and socio-economic situations in real life in his play by centering on the essential elements of American plays, “memory, media, and modernity.” Numerous American writers, including Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, and others, produced their works in reaction to or as a result of the dominant cultural or societal norms (Sharma, 2023). Similarly, the play *The Glass Menagerie* is a reaction against the existing academic standards that prevailed in New England and Europe during the time it was written. The consequent section underscores the previous works on the play carried out to date which make *The Glass Menagerie* a quintessential play for readers of all ages, and a “Plastic Glass” genre that blends the middle class, experiences, characters’ displays, and cultures, which is enlivened by the common people and eternal survivors of the 21st century.

2. Previous Research

The Glass Menagerie is a memory, revelatory and autobiographical play that presents a story of sufferings, desires, thwarted ambition, fear of non-being and family conflicts that depict society. Furthermore, Chowdhary (2014) stated that Williams presented the social and political tensions in modern society in the form of a ‘memory play’. The current study undertakes three elements memory, media, and modernity to see how far Williams accomplished his objectives in portraying the deterioration of values, culture, traditions, and socio-economic problems to bring new force and genre to American drama. In our previous studies, many types of memory have been focused on; however, Tulving’s (1985) psychological terminology, which is also referred to it as “episodic” (Hoerl, 2007; Dokic, 2014; Hopkins, 2014; Perrin & Rousset, 2014) has been taken up for the study. Episodic memory also known as recollective memory is, perhaps, used to recollect personal past events, and Klein (2015) revealed that episodic truly merits the name “memory”. This began with Aristotle (Sorabji, 2006) and continued with early modern philosophers including Locke (1998). Williams produced a frank memoir published in modified form as *Memoirs* (1975) which presented his homosexuality, addiction, and mental illness. Many scholars in the past also used memory to relate their present with the past. Alike, Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* in American drama, Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and Dickens’s *David Copperfield* in English plays used the concept of memory to illustrate the reality of their times. Similarly, Williams uses memory in his plays to show how people get trapped and get victims of memory that affect livelihood. People often consider memory as the best means to escape from the present reality. Alike, Saleh (2010) stated that Williams used memory as a recurrent motif in the plays to escape from reality to generate the impression that his human archetypes endure harsh social, political, and economic conditions.

Additionally, in the current context, there are multiple sources, contents, and memories known to readers through “media” who have got the standards set by Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Eugene O’Neill, and his contemporaries. But *The Glass Menagerie* also incorporates shards of memories, media, and modernity and is a congenial depiction of a modern spirit that the playwright shares with the common people and readers whose voices he intercepts. Media helps and connects both the writer and people to deepen their relationships. Egginton and Wegenstein (2007) suggest that media of the transmission and creation of literary works have a significant impact on the content and form of those works. Therefore, it brings positive effects by making people aware of their rights, and ongoing challenges and acts as a mirror of society. Baker (2017) believes that literature is a form of media that can be used for art, communication, and message-giving. Media staging plays serves a significant role in exposing the real predicament of people and an undented picture of society by characterizing through various characters. Nair (2020) considers media and literature inseparable cogs, complementing each other to express people’s sentiments, attitudes, and reactions. Besides, it affects society quickly since literature transforms and affects change at the core level because it touches people’s hearts and souls. Similarly, Williams’ Wingsfields’ family members Amanda, Tom, and Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* had got immense success when it was staged to be a natural reflection of contemporary life, and it still remains media where people feel and realize their own presence and role in different characters.

The author believes in the core values every tradition, culture, and society holds for its people to provide them with a unique identity. All these exist for a long time in a particular society and eventually pass on to generations. The modernity taken up for discussion is a post-traditional period that characterized an unprecedented shift away from existing traditions. Thapar (1998) explains tradition as “the handing down of knowledge or the passing on of a doctrine or a technique” (267). Sometimes, the law of change prevails that brings certain changes in the mindset of people to benefit their culture or society. This new perception, novelty, nobility, and sense of newness become modernity. Williams’s impulse toward modernity appealed to him to take a giant leap and unanticipated decision by choosing the names of his characters for his play, thus, making them universal or representatively middle-class American. The author

came up with this title after reading over Williams' works in great detail and taking into account both historical and contemporary events. Sharma (2023a) asserts that the title through varied perspectives and headings portrays characters' attitudes, temperaments, indomitable desires, actions, and obsession which collectively make them worth reading. Alike, the protagonists in the play are largely responsible for the components 'memory, media, and modernity' in *The Glass Menagerie* that the article is going to detail.

3. Research Questions

This study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how Williams could effectively use 'memory, media and modernity' to portray the present conditions of middle-class people living between illusion and reality. Additionally, the study of these three elements together has hardly been discussed which is imperative to present traditions and social, cultural, economic, and political conditions of society. The author makes a seminal attempt to achieve the objectives by addressing the following research questions.

RQ1. Does Williams use 'memory' as a powerful vehicle and how does introducing new elements of drama narrating past incidents bring unbeatable changes affecting characters' lives to enhance the influence of his writings on people?

RQ2. Does the 'media' play a vital role in disseminating and portraying people's present conditions, predicaments, and true picture of society?

RQ3. How far Williams could portray 'modernity' through his characters that affected their lives in the play?

3.1 Research Method

In this study, a descriptive study design with a component of qualitative analysis is used. We adopted this literary research approach to find out answers to the aforementioned research questions and get a credible solution and strengthen our arguments. Additionally, the method tries to establish the relationship between the new genre of literature and society, between Williams and *The Glass Menagerie*, and its acceptance in the literary canon. This new genre of drama may assist young learners to know more about its form, style, and theme in order to receive it completely that eventually may be added to the methods for teaching literature in universities. The researcher gathered the information for this study by reading edited books, past research, journal articles, theoretical viewpoints, and resources on *The Glass Menagerie* and related works. He also critically examined the literature on Williams's ability to see things from several angles and his use of memory, media, modernity, and drama elements to make the play entertaining. The researcher, however, also looked into other studies on a number of issues that the play or glass genre drama raises and that is carefully discussed further.

4. Findings

Williams establishes the characters through "memory" and adds new drama elements (light, music, and an onstage screen). By describing historical events, he relates the tale to strengthen the reader's effect on his writings. It causes an unsettling change in people's life by correctly portraying human suffering and the all-or-nothing aspect of American civilization. The Wingfield family is depicted as being divided between dream and reality, which makes them naive, impatient, and full of unpleasant memories. Williams asserts that "media" is an effective tool for raising public awareness of the benefits and drawbacks of tradition, culture, and the social, political, and economic circumstances in which society finds itself. Additionally, he used this element to illustrate and draw attention to the challenges that people face today and the true nature of humanity. It testifies to the advancements in media technology in the last century and the evolution from the postmodern to the digital age. Williams bravely included the "modernity" factor, which is required to reflect people's personalities, pessimism, and delusions in order to add the element of realism, through the actions of his characters. Williams successfully contrasts two opposing schools of thought when we find that Tom and Laura, unlike Amanda, are products of post-modernity where they know themselves better. However, their mother's insistence on modernity and illusions trumps their aspirations.

5. Discussion

In relation to our first research question (RQ1), we found that Williams used 'memory' to introduce the characters and narrate the play to the audience. He used 'memory' as a powerful vehicle to enhance the influence of his writings on people by describing past incidents. Additionally, he introduced new elements of drama where the characters through recalling and forgetting bring unbeatable changes affecting their lives. Memory brings both happiness and sorrow; however, brings fantasy and short-time joy that turns into an unhealthy environment and chaos in family affairs. We often read many types of memory; however, Williams (1971, 2007) in this novel uses episodic or recollective memory that makes the play memorable and interesting. Brewer (1996) defines it as a reliving of people's extraordinary experiences from a certain time in their past. Also, Hoerl (2007) states that episodic memories are those of events and situations that happen in a man's life and some scholars consider all episodic memories autobiographical. Similarly, Tennessee Williams, in *The Glass Menagerie*, interprets and presents a real picture of American society depicting critical

conditions people pass through and assimilating to Williams' own life. The play, presented as a "memory play," exemplifies the struggles and societal issues faced by middle-class Americans. Williams believed that society offered people a dream of pleasant and material prosperity, which, unfortunately, made people live in a fantasy and dreamy world, struggled to make ends meet, and could not attain the offers. Wingfields, in the play, represent lower middle-class people and used all ways and means to show off far from reality. All three main characters' mother Amanda, her son Tom and their daughter Laura feel pleasure in escaping present conditions with their past memories. Amanda's emptiness, poverty, and single mother's responsibility compel her to recapitulate her memories. Similarly, Tom who wanted to pursue a successful poetic career had to work at a shoe factory to meet her family's needs. Laura dwells in her fanciful world of 'the glass menagerie' since she has no hope to get a good husband. Additionally, the characters' unwelcome memories develop unwelcome situations that creep in multiple unhealthy and unexpected issues, ultimately, leaving no room but only way left to keep away from recollecting prior experiences.

Tom Wingfield, as a narrator and protagonist in *The Glass Menagerie*, begins with an introductory speech: "[...] dressed as a merchant sailor", Tom walks onto the stage and, "[...] addresses the audience" (Williams, 1999: 4), from the outside of the play. He introduces the characters to the gathering, underscores their socio-political background, and also introduces a few dramatic techniques such as light, music, and an onstage screen to project images making the play unique. Furthermore, the play brings all three main characters, Tom, Laura, and Amanda obsession to recapitulate the past memories that divide them at different stages. Tom's father deserted his family and put the entire responsibility on his mother Amanda who by compulsion struggled to take care care of Tom and Laura. The poverty and other expenses compelled Tom to desert his aspirations of a 'successful poetic career' to work in a factory. Sometimes Amanda fluctuates between illusion and reality and ignores the brutal, and realistic situations. She thinks back to the glory years of her youth when she resided at Blue Mountain and had seventeen gentlemen come in one Sunday afternoon, as she struggles to find a suitable match for her disabled daughter Laura.

Tom's deviation from his primary pursuits induces pessimism and darkness in life. This further intense his physically disabled sister Laura's sufferings to not only lose hope of finding a husband but trap her into her imaginary world of 'the glass menagerie'. The societal, political, and economic conditions have been depicted, narrated, and characterized vividly to show the consequences of degenerated and corrupt New England society. All characters in the play are vivid depictions of potently mournful and neurotic who seem to be real as they represent Tom as Williams, his mother Amanda as mother Edwin, and Laura as sister Rose. Consequently, we know it for its autobiographical character and its memory-based structure. This 'memory play' which earlier used an Acting edition for the Broadway performance in 1945 is today's play with both Reading and Acting editions, containing some 1100 revisions, all introduced by the author himself (Howard-Smith and Heintzelman 93). This increase in revisions and grand success has been complemented and supported by the media that adds color and flavor to the play.

RQ2. In relation to our second research question, we found media serves significantly in disseminating and portraying people's present conditions, predicaments, and true picture of society. Scholars have pointed out that the media is a strong pillar to spread awareness, of the pros and cons of tradition, culture, and social, political, and economic conditions of society.

Media as a part of literature and society captures and mirrors human actions, expressions, and experiences. Besides, it reflects and records the true picture of people, traditions, culture, and society. This facilitates artistic skills that attempt to express personal feelings and emotions rather than to depict the surface reality objectively. Alike, *The Glass Menagerie* comprises Reading and Acting Edition, where Williams perceived and introduced the use of a screen device as a cinematic technique in "poetry in space" for a non-realistic effect. The Acting Edition was always conducted on stage; nevertheless, theatre director Dimitris Mavrikios risks staging the Reading Edition of *The Glass Menagerie* in 1997 which became an artistic and commercial success. This theatrical media brought the prologue's factious and alienated parts to the audience to demonstrate genuine effects. Hamali (2013, 45) considered it essential to demonstrate how Mavrikios' direction caused some of the "rebellious" components to actually take place on stage. This lesson also looks at how Tennessee Williams' use of the screen device and his direction notes in *The Glass Menagerie* allow for discussion of the politics of viewing. Williams has got the advantage that most of his plays produced till 1960 have characters who may portray the real conditions. As a result, his plays were extremely well-liked when they were adapted into films in the early 1950s, including *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This feature gives Williams the freedom to widen his scope as 'poetic' or 'magic' realism which he already accomplishes in the most cinematic of his plays *The Glass Menagerie* (Brandt, 1967: 181).

This memory play has gained a lot of acclaim since its debut and was largely based on his short tale *Portrait of a Girl in Glass*. Elia Kazan, who directed several of Williams' plays, acknowledged his genius by saying, "Everything in his life is in his plays, and everything in his plays is in his life" (Donald, 1997:171). Moreover, his plays' cinematic features are well-thought because of the aspects in his screenplay-turned-stage-script that are more recognizable and probably better

suited for the theater than for the movies (Howard-Smith and Heintzelman 88-89). Yet, his new approach to theater and style that emerged in the 1970s drew criticism and couldn't gain a favorable response till 1997. Despite all criticisms, Williams' entering into the Poets' Corner in the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York in 2009 included notable artists and performers Eli Wallach, Vanessa Redgrave, John Guare, Sylvia Miles, Gregory Mosher, and Ben (Griessmeyer) Berrytook (Rand, 2009). Besides, an annual Tennessee Williams Festival is held in St. Louis, Missouri to discuss his plays leading to fruitful literary discussions. His induction into the American Theater Hall of Fame in 1979 was supported by the fact that this piece won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and that several of his works have been adapted for the big screen. It exemplifies the advancements in media technology throughout the postmodern age.

Today, the revolution in digital media enhanced access to millions of people using the media have created awareness in people, multiple diversity of media products, people creating their profiles, and blogs and uploading on media platforms and opportunities. Consequently, societies rely more on the media and get acquainted with the latest development across the world. Some sociologists, according to Thompson (2016), assert that the media produces a kind of "hyper-reality" in which what we see in the media is both different from and more real than reality.

RQ3. In relation to our third research question, we have found that Williams succeeded substantially in portraying 'modernity' through his characters which affected their lives in the play. The current study might on the other hand not be able to justify modernity through all the characters; however, it addressed the question from a larger perspective.

Modernity presents individual perceptions in the current time and becomes more prominent in the dynamic business, technology, and literary world, and needs to learn and understand multidisciplinary perspectives towards its development. We usually consider modernity and modernism synonymous, but complement and supplement each other; however, both are quite different in their uses in different contexts. The term 'modernity' refers to the amalgamation of social, cultural, political, economic, and spatial relationships that influence the nature of personal, social, and economic life at a certain time and space.

Things, contexts, practices, methods, and scenarios today may term as new as opposed to past or archaic things which include literature, lifestyle, technology, education, perceptions towards things, etc. Keep, McLaughlin and Parmar (2000) opine that modernism rejects nineteenth-century optimism and marks a clear break with Victorian bourgeois morality. They presented a profoundly pessimistic picture of a culture in disarray and this despair often results in an apparent apathy and moral relativism. They painted an incredibly bleak picture of a culture in disorder, where this melancholy regularly manifests as ostensible emotion and morally upright philosophical belief.

Similar pessimism and illusions have been reflected in Williams's play *The Menagerie Glass*. Moreover, we often mess up tradition and modernity, but are two sides of a coin and are inseparable and interdependent for presenting facts in real contexts. Jain (1998) refers to it as "a colonial construct" in a post-colonial context and quotes Heesterman as arguing that we have the propensity to exaggerate the stability of traditional cultures and the instability caused by modernity. Modernity refers to new ideas, perceiving things the current perspectives, and individual goals; however, tradition is a cultural force in a particular sociocultural setting. Nonetheless, the union of the two leads to the positive expansion and advancement of culture and civilization. Alike, Tom's mother Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* integrates both elements of tradition and modernity. She has her own world of illusions and often escapes from reality in adverse conditions; nevertheless, she is dedicated, determined, and bold and takes care of her children Tom and Laura since her husband deserted her. Additionally, she devoted herself to the betterment of her children. Uncertainties, the burden of children, and emptiness have made her fabricate things to fill the void, which eventually failed her to understand her children since of their progressive and modern approach to life.

Furthermore, western or European culture as opposed to New England culture, traditions, and perception of the people was different because of multiple factors globalization, industrialization, technological developments, and improved culture and traditions. Williams brought multiple changes and new concepts to his play 'The Menagerie Glass' which reflects modernity in the culture, thinking, society, and people's behavior. These changes bring both positive and negative perceptions in the modern world man. The false dreams and promises given by the authorities are often caught updated and modern people in illusions that are far away from reality as shown through the Wingfield family in the play. The consolidation of illusions, fantasies, and dreams compels their escape from the bitter realities of life. Williams examined the mental, emotional, and spiritual states of Amanda, Tom, and Laura to demonstrate how illusion affects people in stressful situations. Jerath (2021) claims that post-modernity is a characteristic of modernity that profoundly replaces it, resulting in a fundamental difference between society and the "modern" society. Amanda epitomizes modernity and likes to unwind from the humdrum of daily life by playing games. She informs Laura, "You be the lady this time and I'll be the darky." In praising Laura, she chooses to ignore her actual physical impairment and instead describes Laura as having merely a minor physical flaw. Amanda is unable to believe that Tom is substantially different

from her and will one day leave for an adventure like his father due to her fantasies. The family responsibilities, financial crunch, unpleasant facts, and societal problems. Like any other mother, she was equally worried about her daughter Laura. She says to Laura: "I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren't prepared to occupy a position." Even though she chooses not to accept Laura's difficulties, she is realistic enough to see them. She also realizes Tom will leave soon after reading the letter he received from the Merchant Marine. For the aforementioned reasons, she must ask Tom to make arrangements for the guy caller to show up. Consequently, Amanda starts living in the gentlemen's callers' arena and she expects may come any day to marry Laura. Tom and Laura have different temperaments and their mother's denial to accept them as different from her invites chaos and an unhealthy environment. Amanda's reluctance to understand Laura's physical deformities and expecting her to develop charm and gaiety brings illusions and escape from reality. Amanda is a chatterbox and pretty, but Laura leads a quiet, serious, and sensitive life. Thus, Tom and Laura are the products of post-modernity where they know themselves better; however, the modernity of fantasies thrust upon them by their mother overpower their ambitions.

6. Conclusion

This article explores how Tennessee Williams portrays the harsh reality of people's lives and socio-economic situations in real life in his play by emphasizing the key elements of American plays, "memory, media, and modernity." Therefore, we addressed three questions that how Williams uses 'memory' as a powerful vehicle and introduces new elements of drama narrating past incidents to bring unbeatable changes in people's lives. Besides, we also attempted to describe the role of 'media' in informing people regarding the current developments of society. Additionally, Williams's vision to bring 'modernity' through his characters may add color and value to the play. As a result, *The Glass Menagerie* undoubtedly includes the seed of a great play, and its enormous global success stems from the idea's power to transcend memory, media, and modernity in its actualization. The title, which is quite descriptive and expresses the harsh truth of people's existence while simultaneously finding value in Tom's simple worldliness, makes these elements and forces immediately clear. Also, Tom serves as the narrator for the first time enhances this impression. His middle-class relatives are commonly seen as representations of the drama's protagonists. Laura Wingfield in the play signifies a new genre in American drama and is modeled after William's sister Rose. The elements and characteristics stated above lend credence to the arguments that Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* is a monument to American theater from the 20th century and best captures the mood of the time in contrast to other plays from the era. It is a "Plastic Glass" drama that blends aspects of the middle class, experiences, character development, and cultures before being reenergized by common people and lasting 21st-century existence. As a result, it is a timeless style that is appropriate for many societies and age groups.

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