

# The glass menageri



Cecily's perception of memory may be little naive, but she certainly has a point. Memory distorts events that have happened in our past, colouring it with our own thoughts and impressions.

Tennessee William's *The Glass Menagerie* is in essence a memory play, told from hindsight by one of its characters, Tom Wingfield. Although the play is fiction, it presents its audience with "...

truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion. " (Scene 1, p. 234) It tells the story of Tom's past through his memories, with him acting as the narrator of the play. The lighting, music and screen device are all used to create nostalgia and sadness, to speak to the heart, not the mind, "...

for memory is seated predominantly in the heart. " (Stage directions, p. 233)

However, even though Tennessee Williams states that the *Menagerie* "...

is not realistic" (Scene 1, p. 235), there are significant realistic elements on which the play is based. Williams uses his own past as the basis for his characters and most of the plot. The historical and social background in which the play is set is also realistic and referred to throughout the play.

Williams even introduces one character as "... an emissary from the world of reality" (Scene 1, p. 235) into the dream world in which the characters in the *Menagerie* live, to emphasise how far the characters in the play indeed is removed from it.

Therefore the *Glass Menagerie* is largely memory, but woven around real occurrences, a creation of memory, but based on reality. Tennessee Williams did not intend for the *Glass Menagerie* to be a work of realistic

staging and conventions. He aimed to use "... whatever license with dramatic convention [was] convenient for his purposes.

.. " (Scene 1, p. 34) to create an atmosphere of nostalgia, false happiness and brooding despair.

" The play is memory. Being a memory play, it is dimly lit, it is sentimental... " (Scene 1, p.

235). Williams describes the set in his stage directions as " rather dim and poetic", with muted lighting creating a dusky ambience that accentuates the nostalgic air of the play. The play is set in this half-light, with the lighting changing to reflect the mood of the action on stage. This emotional colouring is most certainly memory, intended to reflect the feelings of the characters and mood of the scene, rather than the actual time of day. Williams uses music at certain points to emphasise incidents and themes and also as a symbol for various characters.

He created the Glass Menagerie theme music as a symbol for the character Laura, and the mournful ' Ave Maria' for her longsuffering mother Amanda. In reality of course, there are never such fitting musical soundtracks, but "... in memory, everything seems to happen to music.

" (Scene 1, p. 235) Though not realistic, music, from dance hall jazz to a " lone fiddle in the wings" or the scratchy victrola, all play an important part in creating the atmosphere of the Glass Menagerie. Williams's prolific use of symbolism is also rather memory and stage technique sooner than reality. It could perhaps the ironic " Aha! " afterthought that one gets so often when

looking back on a situation. Some theatre critics also maintain that, because William's material for his play is real and based on his childhood memories, he does not have to drape his plays in realistic conventions for fear of lack of credibility. He can afford to use such non-realistic staging techniques and such extensive symbolism because he does not have to prove that his plays are real.

As Tom says, "... I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you Truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion.

" (Scene 1, p. 234) I personally also think that, even though the Menagerie is not a 'realistic' play in theatre terms, it is far more real to me than any other play I have seen so far. The heart is more powerful than the mind, and the staging of this play speaks directly to the heart. Therefore the elaborate use of conventions to create an authentic memory feel is very effective rather than detrimental.

Tom Wingfield's role as the narrator is another "... undisguised convention of the play. " Tom is in part reality and in part memory: he plays as a character in the play, in the 'memory', but also reflects on from the present, from 'reality'.

He introduces the scenes and gives an insightful commentary into the background of the play. This use of a narrator talking about the past from his point of view is the most obvious point in which this play is 'memory'. It is from Tom's (or rather, Tennessee William's) memories that the story is told,

and his comments shape our opinions about his family and situation. Tennessee Williams's plays are known to be intensely biographical.

Therefore much of the material Williams used in the *Menagerie* and his other play is, or rather was reality. He used his own family as a base for his characters, and his experiences as a child and adolescent as the basis for the plot. In the *Glass Menagerie*, he even wrote himself into one of the characters, Tom Wingfield. The cast of the *Menagerie* is a stylised replica of his family as it was in the 1920s and 30s. Williams recreated himself in the guise of Tom Wingfield, who has much in common with the young Williams.

Tennessee's real name was also Tom (or rather, Thomas Lanier), and both try to escape the harsh reality of city life, Tom by "going to the movies" (Scene 3, p. 252) and Tennessee, who buried himself in the fantasy world of books. His father, Cornelius Coffin, was a traveling salesman for a shoe manufacturer and therefore often absent, as is Amanda's much bemoaned husband in the *Menagerie*. Like Amanda, his mother, Edwina Dakin came from a rich and prestigious southern family, and had to adapt from being a spoilt southern belle to being the submissive housewife to an increasingly abusive husband.

She was very protective of her two children who she saw as sickly and in need of constant nurturing. She deeply loved and cared for her children, but her constant anxiety for them and her protective manner was also cause for many of the psychological problems they had to later in life. She, like Amanda, could be unwittingly cruel in her desire to do the best for her "

precious children. ” (Scene 5, p. 266) Williams had two siblings, an older sister Rose, and a younger brother of whom is relatively little known.

The influence of his sister however, can be felt dramatically in all of his plays. The sudden uprooting of the family from the Deep South to the urban environment of St. Louis, Missouri, where they lived in a small, dark and dreary apartment, had a dramatic effect on both all them. The hardest hit however was Rose. She ceased to develop as a person as failed to cross the barrier from childhood to becoming an adult.

She, like Laura, was shy, quiet and lovely, and unable to cope with the real world. She had a very delicate nature and tendency towards mental illness, and the new traumatic life in the city made her withdraw more and more into herself. She became schizophrenic, and her condition worsened until their mother decided to allow doctors to perform a full frontal lobotomy on her. This was devastating to Williams, who deeply loved and cared for his sister.

This chaotic and often traumatic family life forms the basis for the Glass Menagerie. Although reality was not so neat and packaged for Williams as it is in his play, but he has worked into it many of his actual experiences and memories of his childhood. The Glass Menagerie is set in the “..

. in that quaint period, the thirties... ” in St. Louis America, the exact same time and place in which Williams himself grew up.

The economy was in the full grips of the Great Depression which had devastated the lifestyle of the previously moderately wealthy middle classes. Tom refers to this in his opening speech, referring to the “...

huge middle class of America” whose “... eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes, and were having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a failing economy. ” (Scene 1, p. 234) This rather fanciful metaphor can be interpreted as that the middle class were unwilling to confront such a bleak present and future in which there was no hope of regaining their former wealth.

This desolation and falling of living standards can be seen reflected in the play. Williams has set the play in a large squalid apartment block, “... one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units..

. ” (Stage directions, p. 233) in which most of the American lower and upper middleclass lived during the Depression. Whereas the rest of America was barely scraping in a living, Hollywood was booming. Stars such as Greta Garbo and Mickey Mouse (Scene 4, p.

154) presented people with an escape from their dreary day-to-day lives. Tom goes to the movies to experience the “ adventures” that his life at home and the warehouse lacks. “ Adventure and change were imminent” during the thirties. There were significant political developments in Europe, where Hitler had seized power in 1933, and was re-arming at a frantic pace. Williams refers to the looming threat of Germany’s hunger for conquest during his speech at the start of Scene 5: “ Adventure and Change were imminent in this year.

[They were] suspended in the mists over Berchtesgarden, caught in the fold of Chamberlain’s umbrella... All the world was waiting for bombardments! ”

(Scene 5, p. 65) Williams also refers repeatedly to the Spanish revolution: " In Spain there was Guernica. Here there was only shouting and confusion.

" He draws an interesting parallel between the uprising and the middle class, which he calls " the fundamentally enslaved sections of American society. "

(Stage Directions p. 233) The Spanish Civil War was fought by the lower classes (farmers and labourers) against the oligarchy of the wealthy.

Williams was obviously someone who believed in the communist cause and worker's rights, as Tom mentions the labour uprisings in cities across the US, but seems disappointed by their failure. A part from the historical background of the Menagerie, there is also a social background which influence the actions some characters.

Social Stereotypes and expectations were still a large part of life in the thirties. The man was seen as the ' bread-winner' of the family, and he was expected to provide for his wife and children. When the father was absent, as in the case of the Wingfields, the eldest son was to fulfil that responsibility. As Amanda tells Tom that he can leave, "..

. but not until [he has] someone to take [his] place. " (Scene 4, p. 61) It was seen as shameful and ' unmanly' to desert one's family, but that did not keep many men from doing just that. In a society dominated by males, men could get away with a lot more than was ever possible for a woman. Women were expected to stay at home and keep the household.

They had to cook, clean, iron and generally look after the family. Since the 1920s, women could also work, but their income was substantially smaller than that of a man, and their career choices were limited. Amanda tries to

get Laura into a 'business career' as a typist and secretary. This was the typical job entrusted to a woman, a job that was not too physically demanding, ladylike and submissive.

For a woman to ever climb higher than a secretary or factory overseer (for women only of course) would have been highly unlikely if not impossible. Work or housewife, those were the only two options open for women at that time. Otherwise they became "old maids... barely tolerated spinsters.

.. eating the crust of humility all their lives." (Scene 2, p. 245) This is the social and historical background against the Glass Menagerie is set. It explains some of the actions (or inactions) taken by some of the characters such as Amanda and Tom, and also provides Williams with the opportunity to make some interesting comments about American society at the time.

Tennessee Williams's the Glass Menagerie is indeed a memory play. Its use of a narrator, lighting and music, and the extensive symbolism are all products of memory rather than reality. They all conjure up a nostalgic feel that that speaks to the heart, rather than the mind. However, memory can not be created from nothing.

It is the process or ability to recall a past incident, something that once was reality. Therefore the Glass Menagerie is indeed memory, but firmly set on the base of reality. Williams drew on his own family and childhood experiences for the characters and plot of the play, embodying not only his mother, father and sister as characters, but also himself. He set the action in a period of history rather than in an undefined time, with specific references to historic events such as the Spanish Civil War and the looming threat of

World War II. His characters act within specific social expectations and stereotypes, even while trying to escape or forget them. It is hard to make a judgement to what degree exactly the Glass Menagerie is memory and to which degree it is reality, as we are dealing with words and emotions, not numbers.

However, we can safely say that there are both large elements of memory and of reality present in the play, and that while memory dominates the performance and creates a lasting impression on its readers and viewers, reality supports and shapes this memory. Both elements work together hand in hand to create a fascinating whole, a masterpiece of a truly great playwright.