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The Glass Menagerie: A Memory Play **Memory lives in the heart**

By Dirk Visser, September 22, 2016

This weekend the Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad carried an interview with psychiatrist Douwe Draaisma about his latest book: *If My Memory Does Not Deceive Me*, in which he argues that memories are never objective, but that they are shaped by the present. The book's epigraph reads "... something that happened in one's youth is often the consequence of an occurrence at a more advanced age."

Draaisma might have deliberately planned the publication of his book to coincide with this evening. For 'memory' is one of the main themes, if not *the* main theme of Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie*. And you don't have to take my word for it: it was the author himself who called *The Glass Menagerie* a memory play.

By way of introduction to tonight's performance I intend to explore the various ways in which memory is at play in the play. Without giving away too much of the plot—I don't want to spoil the surprise for those who haven't read or watched the play before—I'll highlight a few scenes and elements of the play that might be worth looking out for.

Sentimental, not realistic

When the lights go up on stage, we are addressed by a narrator, Tom Wingfield, who explains the set-up of *The Glass Menagerie*. While we hear music in the background, he tells us: "The play is memory. Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic. In memory everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fiddle in the wings." He then goes on to introduce the characters in the play: himself, his mother Amanda, and his sister Laura.

Missing from this set of characters is the father of the family. He is not represented live on stage, but he is nonetheless very much present, Tom says, in the form of a "larger-than-life-size photograph over the mantel". In other words, though Tom and Laura's father has left the family, his memory still looms large and influences the remaining family members to no small extent.



Dirk Visser at the Stadsschouwburg

In this opening monologue, Tom gives an important hint to the audience. This is a memory play, it is sentimental, it is not realistic. In other words, far from conveying an objective truth, showing us what really happened, we witness a person's colored memories. What we are going to see is what Tom remembers; it would probably not stand up in court. And not only are events colored—they may not have happened exactly as Tom remembers them—but the other characters, Amanda, Laura, the absent father, and the gentleman caller, are not depicted objectively either.

Throughout the play, Williams uses subtle and creative means to remind us that what we are witnessing is indeed memory and not reality. A scene worth looking out for in this respect is the one where Tom arrives home at five in the morning. When the scene opens we hear "a church tolling the hour of five". Tom arrives home, and has a brief discussion with his sister, who admonishes him about his coming home drunk. Then, suddenly, we hear the clock strike six, but we are not more than five minutes into the scene. Then Amanda's voice calls out, "Rise and shine," Tom sits up in bed, and Laura says "Tom! It's nearly seven." Of course, we could read this as an indication that Laura cannot properly tell the time, or that Tennessee Williams messed up his writing, but more likely we are seeing what Tom himself can remember, i.e. the moments when he is awake. Apparently, between the hours of six, when he should have gotten up, and seven, when Laura warns him about the time, Tom was asleep.

Another way in which the script subtly makes clear that its representation of events is not realistic, is the manner in which the play is structured. *The Glass Menagerie* does not comply with the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action, nor does it follow the rules of the 19th and early 20th century's so-called well-made-play, which consists of three acts, in which the action is continuous, i.e. the events in Act Two immediately follow those of Act One. Instead, Tennessee Williams gave his play a structure of seven independent scenes of increasing length.

The first scene is the shortest. The seventh, in which events come to a head, is about as long as the first five combined. Events depicted in these scenes do not follow each other immediately, but they may be days, weeks, or even months apart. Combined, they tell Tom's story of how he came to leave his family. Of course, the scenes show events as Tom remembers them: they are not objective renditions of reality. In the longest scene, Tom is not even present. It clearly depicts events as he imagines they might have occurred.



Helene Davos in The Glass Menagerie

Escape from a trap

So what story does *The Glass Menagerie* tell? I need to be careful here, of course, in order not to give too much away. The events that Tom unfolds for us concern his family, consisting of his mother Amanda, his sister Laura, and—not present in the flesh but, as he says in the opening monologue, hovering over them in the form of his portrait - father Wingfield, who for some reason or other fled the family. From the scenes in which Tom acts as narrator, it becomes clear that he, in his turn, has also run away. This is explained partly in the character description on page one of the script. “His nature is not remorseless, but to escape from a trap he has to act without pity,” Williams writes.

The trap he has to escape from is both his family and his house, a suffocating apartment in St. Louis. Tom wants to be a writer, but instead, being the man in the house, he has to earn a living working in a warehouse. His dominant mother does not even allow him to read—when she finds a copy of D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in the house, she returns it to the library: such filth has no place in a decent family like hers. The only thing that seems to keep Tom sane are his nightly exploits, to the local cinema, he says—but can we take his word on trust? — where he can dwell in a world of make-believe.

Throughout the play, Tom and his mother are constantly at loggerheads. One quarrel follows another. But what unites them are the love for and worry about the daughter of the family, Laura. When in the end Tom leaves the family, he feels guilty not so much for having deserted his mother, but for having left Laura behind. The memories that haunt him—and which are enacted in the play—are unhappy ones: reliving them does not exorcise them. On the contrary, at every performance of *The Glass Menagerie* he has to go through them again.

Tom may suffer from unhappy memories, but he is not the only character to do so. His mother, Amanda, is just as caught up in her memories. From the moment she appears on stage, she chatters incessantly about her—allegedly—happy past. She grew up in America’s Deep South, the land of the cotton plantations.

For those who have seen *Gone with the Wind*, Amanda Wingfield is the Scarlett O’Hara of the early scenes of that movie, living the easy life of a so-called Southern Belle, whose only goal in life is to win the hand of an eligible young suitor, a Beau. If we are to believe Amanda, she used to be the center of attention. Crowds of young men would offer themselves to her as potential marriage material. Her children, Laura and Tom, have heard Amanda’s recollections of her “gentleman callers” many times before, but they indulge her. There is something strange about Amanda’s memories, however. If she was so surrounded by fine young men, how come she ended up with a husband who first took her to a tiny apartment in a poor neighborhood of St. Louis, and then left her to fend for herself? Tom and Laura, and the audience as well, quickly sees Amanda’s long monologues about gentleman callers for the unreliable memories they are: probably Amanda was never the popular Belle she claims to be, but in order to survive her current dire circumstances she needs to create this memory of a happy youth.

Though she seems a very different character from her mother and brother, memories also play an important role in Laura’s life. She may not speak half as much as the other characters in the play—she even has fewer lines than the gentleman caller who appears only

in scenes six and seven—she is nevertheless the character who drives the action of the play. Completely the opposite of her chatterbox mother, Laura is extremely shy and seems happiest when she can withdraw into her world of music and her collection of glass animals, the “glass menagerie” that gives the play its title. Laura is that kind of person who is unable to hold herself together in the outside world.

During the opening scenes of the play, we learn that she attends a business college, where she takes typing lessons. However, it becomes clear very quickly that due to her vulnerable character she could not face her teachers and fellow-students, and was unable to stand the stress of work. Instead, she spent all her days walking in the park, not daring to go home in fear of her mother. Of course, as these things go, she is found out. When Amanda realizes that Laura is unfit to make a living for herself, she decides that she and Tom should find Laura a suitor, a “gentleman caller,” so that she may get married and be provided for.

Like Tom and Amanda, Laura also carries with her memories of a happy past. In one of the few scenes where she and her mother are having a heart-to-heart conversation, she confesses that during high school she was in love with one of the most popular boys, Jim O’Connor. He even had a pet name for her, ‘Blue Roses’, which suggests that he also felt affection for her. However, their love came to nothing—how many high school loves do?—and Jim later got engaged to a girl called Emily Eisenbach. It appears that after having lost Jim, Laura feels that she has missed her one and only chance to find a future husband. All she has left are her memories of Jim, memories which are much a fantasy world as her glass animals.

Even more than the absent father, Laura is at the center of the play. When Amanda and Tom hatch a plan to find Laura a gentleman caller, events are set in motion that will drive the play to its disastrous conclusion, which will prompt Tom to leave the household forever. Rest assured, I won’t say anything more—see for yourselves how things come to a head when Tom announces that he has found a gentleman caller.

Tom and Tennessee

Clearly, memory, however unreliable, plays an important role in the lives of the characters of the play. But it is also in another sense that *The Glass Menagerie* is a memory play. Many critics have pointed out that this is Tennessee Williams’ most autobiographical play, with characters and events resembling persons and occurrences in William’s own life. In their enthusiasm, they have compiled long lists of similarities between the play and Williams’ life, suggesting that what we are seeing is not so much the fate of a fictional family, but the author’s life story instead.

Of course, these lists of parallels make for interesting reading. However, we need to be careful not to read *The Glass Menagerie* as a reliable autobiography. Though the play



Tennessee Williams in 1965

obviously relies on Williams' own memories, it is, as Tom warns us in the opening monologue "sentimental, not realistic". But bearing this in mind, let's explore a few of these parallels between fiction and real life.

Most obviously, the play's narrator, Tom Wingfield, shares his initials and his first name with the author. Williams' official name at birth was Thomas Lanier Williams; he adopted the name "Tennessee" later in life.

Like the Wingfields, the Williams family originated from the Deep South. And like Amanda, Williams' mother, Edwina, feeling very much out of place in St. Louis, never tired of recounting to her children how in the pre-Civil War days she was very much a Southern Belle. And a successful one at that, receiving on one single day no fewer than thirty gentleman callers. Like Amanda, however, she made the mistake of marrying the wrong man. In Edwina's case this was a man called, believe it or not, Cornelius Coffin Williams. His second name should have given her cause to think again. But marry him she did, and like the Wingfield family the Williamses ended up in a coffin-like apartment in St. Louis, Missouri. For those who want to visit it, the exact address is 6544 Enright Avenue. It is this apartment where young Tennessee Williams spent his early adulthood, like Tom dreaming away by the sound of the music from the dance hall next door.

Also like Tom, Tennessee Williams fled the St. Louis home, leaving his family behind. He was subsequently filled with remorse for deserting his frail sister, Rose, who resembles the character of Laura to a large extent. She also could not handle the pressure of life at a business college. Like Laura, she would wander around in the park, afraid to tell her mother that she had dropped out. At home, she would withdraw into her world of music records and her collection of glass animals.

However, though most critics, and Tennessee Williams himself, were eager to point out Rose's own glass menagerie, in 1995 the critic Lyle Leverich discovered that the collection of glass animals that really was the model for Laura's collection belonged not to Rose but to a Mrs Maggie Wingfield, who lived in the same town during Williams' childhood years. Yes, she is the person from whom the Wingfield family derive their name.

And that is not the only difference between fictional Laura and real-life Rose. Rose, who suffered from schizophrenia—a fact which Williams did not include in the play, supposedly because he wanted to spare his sister—was not as silent and withdrawn as Laura. In fact, she seems to have been as talkative as her mother, and Amanda Wingfield.



Eelco Smits in The Glass Menagerie

The greatest parallel between Tennessee Williams and Tom Wingfield is the fact that they feel guilty for abandoning their sister. During Williams' absence from home, Rose had to be admitted to mental hospital, without him being able to prevent that. It has been suggested that she spent a much longer time there than really necessary. Williams' intervention might have shortened that time, but he was away. Like Tom, Tennessee Williams was haunted by memories of his sister as well as by his sense of guilt.

The final resemblance between Tom and the author is their habit of running away. Elia Kazan, who directed many of Tennessee Williams' plays, once remarked: "Tennessee lived like a fugitive from justice, always changing his whereabouts, ever moving." What it was exactly that Tennessee Williams fled from is not specified, but the words "fugitive from justice" suggest that for some reason or other Williams felt haunted, as Tom does in the play.

Poetic license

Having established that at various levels memory plays an important role in *The Glass Menagerie*, I'd like to round off with a few remarks on the staging of the play. Williams wanted this play to be staged as a memory play, and not, as was usual in his day and age, as a realistic play. That is why the play text is preceded by a few pages of production notes, and why it opens with an elaborate set of stage directions.



Helene Davos and Chris Nietvelt

Surprisingly, these directions first seem to describe a realistic set: the surroundings of the Wingfield apartment are described in great detail. But then Williams remarks: "The scene is memory and therefore not realistic. Memory takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional values of the articles it touches; for memory is seated predominantly in the heart. The interior is therefore rather dim and poetic."

At the opening of the play we should see the rear wall of the Wingfield home, which during Tom's opening monologue becomes transparent. When it does, we should see the living room, and, through a veil, the dining room. Of course, the transparent wall, and the veil serve to make the scenery dim and dreamlike. Whether you find that poetic, I leave up to you to decide.

Interesting elements are the ways in which the production uses light and sound. In his opening monologue, Tom says that "in memory everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fiddler in the wings." I don't know whether we are going to see or hear a fiddler tonight, but I'll certainly be listening for the scenes in which music plays an important role, such as the moments when Laura plays her records, or when the music from the Paradise Dance Hall can be heard in the Wingfield apartment.

Of course, the lighting can also underscore the memory-like atmosphere of the play. At various points in the script Williams gives very explicit instructions on how to achieve this. For instance, in scene three, where Tom and his mother are once again engaged in a word-fight, Laura is present on stage, though she is not speaking. Williams specifies that she is to be lit differently and more clearly than the other characters. This, of course, helps the audience to notice her, even though Tom and Amanda are the prominent agents during this scene. It might also underscore the fact that it is, in fact, Laura, around whom the plot revolves, and not the two characters who are engaged in a shouting match.

Despite his elaborate stage directions, Williams seems to contradict himself in his stipulations on how the play should be produced. In his production notes he says that “being a memory play, *The Glass Menagerie* can be presented with unusual freedom of convention”. This seems to give free reign to theatre companies who want to mount a production of this play. I would imagine that a company like Toneelgroep Amsterdam, whose productions are very much representative of what is called “director’s theater”, would grab this opportunity with both hands.

However, it does raise an interesting question. Even though Williams seems to give a lot of room to the director, he is quite specific in his stage directions and in his description of the atmosphere that he wants to evoke in the play. How did Toneelgroep Amsterdam decide where to follow the author’s instructions, and where to take their own initiative? And what role did the dramaturg, being the intermediary between the text and the stage production, play in this process? Perhaps this is something Tracy and Vera might want to discuss.

Finally, let’s now enjoy tonight’s performance, and I hope we carry home many happy memories of the event. But beware: they may well be deceptive!

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