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MEMORY AS TECHNIQUE AND THEME IN
THE GLASS MENAGERIE AND THE DEATH OF A SALESMAN

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Hamlet notwithstanding, the play is not "the thing." It is, as a whole, an illusion, a reflection or imitation of the real. And in so far as the illusion of the play affects the real, it becomes a true statement of life. The play, then, is a work of art. But it is not like any other of the art forms. Because it is a play, human follies and heroics are exaggerated to effect dramatic stature. It is as far from real life as it pretends to be. But by its exaggeration and dramatic build-up, the play suggests what is universal in human nature.

From this standpoint, it is interesting to compare the function of memory as a technique and as a theme in THE GLASS MENAGERIE and THE DEATH OF A SALESMAN. For both plays center on illusions entertained by the characters and their resulting disenchantment as those illusions clash with reality. In both plays memory is employed as a device to precipitate and entertain the illusion. So what we have is the truth of human ideals and dreams acted out within the dream world of the stage.

In "The Catastrophe of Success," an essay by Williams which serves as an introduction in the New Direction edition of his play, the author says:

It is only in his work that an artist can find reality and satisfaction, for the actual world is less intense than the world of his invention and consequently his life, without recourse to violent disorder, does not seem very substantial. The right condition for him is that in which his work is not only convenient but unavoidable.

For the artist, the play is the thing. It is his own reality. Williams dramatizes this on the stage. Tom is an artist--the "Shakespeare" who writes poems in the warehouse. As narrator, he first tells us that "The play is memory. Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic."¹ It is Tom's memory which is producing the play. Here memory and illusion become one with Tom as the artist.

Throughout the play, memory is identified also with the illusions of the different characters. Amanda reminisces about her gentleman callers in the past. It is this illusion which she clings to and tries to carry on in the person of her daughter. She attempts to bring her memories into reality again. But she fails because Laura is the incarnation of the illusive world. The glass menagerie is the symbol of this. Tom says:

Not quite all--in the eyes of others--strangers--she's terribly shy and lives in a world of her own and those things make her seem a little peculiar to people outside the house.

AMANDA

Don't say peculiar.

TOM

Face the facts. She is.

(THE DANCE-HALL MUSIC CHANGES TO A TANGO THAT HAS A MINOR AND SOMEWHAT OMINOUS TONE!)

AMANDA

In what way is she peculiar--may I ask?

TOM (Gently)

She lives in a world of her own--a world of--little glass ornaments, Mother. . . (Gets up.

AMANDA remains holding brush, looking at him, troubled). She plays old phonograph records and--that's about all--(He glances at himself in the mirror and crosses to door.) (Sc. V, pp. 58-59).

Moreover, Laura's being crippled makes her withdraw further from the world.

The dramatization of Laura's dream world is a classic achievement of the modern stage. Laura has a memory of a time past also. It is the memory of Jim O'Connor, her first and only infatuation in high school. It is a memory of the name he called her--"Blue Roses." It is a memory of sitting through three performances of the opera he starred in so that she could obtain his autograph. It is a memory of his engagement to another girl. Jim O'Connor is an illusion which never became real for Laura. But with the advent of the Gentleman Caller, suddenly memory becomes reality. Jim becomes a possible suitor for Laura. In the superb candle-light scene between Laura and Jim, Laura receives that long-forgotten autograph on the opera sheet; she learns that Jim broke his engagement long ago. Before the two dance, Laura shows Jim her glass menagerie and the unicorn which is a horse unlike the other horses because of its horn. It is unique and does not belong with the others. This is Laura's position. But with the dance, Jim breaks through Laura's dream world. She comes out of herself into the reality of Jim. This is symbolized by the breaking of the unicorn's horn by Jim. As Jim kisses Laura, Laura's dream becomes reality at last. But this is ironic. For in realizing her fondest memories, Laura merely evokes another illusion which Jim proceeds to break after he kisses her. He tells her that he is engaged and must go to meet his fiancée. From this shattering of the illusion she thought had become real, Laura withdraws further into her dream world. The incarnation is complete.

At the end of the play, Tom escapes from the dreamworlds of Amanda and Laura. But in escaping, he never parts from the memory that is Laura, never eludes the world of illusions she stands for:

I traveled around a great deal. The cities swept about me like dead leaves, leaves that were brightly colored but torn away from the branches.

I would have stopped, but I was pursued by something.

It always came upon me unawares, taking me altogether by surprise. Perhaps it was a familiar bit of music. Perhaps it was only a piece of transparent glass--

Perhaps I am walking along a street at night, in some strange city, before I have found companions. I pass the lighted window of a shop where perfume is sold. The window is filled with pieces of colored glass, tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors, like bits of a shattered rainbow.

Then all at once my sister touches my shoulder. I turn around and look into her eyes. . .

Oh Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!

I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into the movies or a bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger--anything that can blow your candles out!

(LAURA bends over the candles.)

--for nowadays the world is lit by lightning! Blow out your candles, Laura,--and so goodbye...

(She blows the candles out.) (Sc. VII, pp. 123-124)

But the candles Laura blows out will only be re-lighted when the play is performed again. And Tom, being the artist he is, will live in his memories and illusions forever as somewhere across the globe the stage lights flicker the opening scene and Tom walks out to being THE GLASS MENAGERIE.

In Williams' play, memory technically is the play. Also, it functions to evoke the illusions of the characters. And in the case of Laura, memory becomes present reality which, in turn, becomes memory again to effect the incarnation she stands for. Here memory functions not only technically but as theme. With Tom's final words, memory as theme and technique become one. For him, the artist, the play is the thing. In DEATH OF A SALESMAN, memory is not the play. However, it is used as a technique to evoke all of Willy Loman's dreams and his failures to realize them. Willy's reminiscences fill fifty pages--nearly half of the play. In them, the audience and Willy realize why he has failed as a father and, consequently, why he has failed as a man in not realizing his past dreams. Because of this, the present is effected as Willy realizes that he is "worth more dead than alive." Memory here not only evokes the past, but it also precipitates another of Willy's illusions--that his death will realize his past dreams for Biff. For Willy, his death is heroic.

The first complete memory scene spells out Willy's illusions and his failure as a father. His dreams center on Biff, his elder son. Because Biff is well liked and a star football player, Willy idolizes him and sees success for him. But Willy condones Biff's stealing of the football: "Sure, he's gotta practice with a regulation ball, doesn't he? Coach'll probably congratulate you on your initiative."¹ He fails to guide Biff not only morally but also academically when he says:

WILLY: That's just what I mean. Bernard can get the best marks in school, y'understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y'understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises. Because the man who

¹ Arthur Miller, DEATH OF A SALESMAN (New York, 1966), Act I, p. 30.

makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. You take me, for instance. I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. "Willy Loman is here!" That's all they have to know, and I go right through. (Act I, p. 33)

In this first memory scene, Willy's failure as a husband is also evoked as he remembers one of his encounters with the Woman, his former mistress.

The second reminiscence concerns Willy's failure to follow the quest for success when he had the chance to go to Alaska with his brother Ben. Ben symbolizes the success which Willy never attained and which Biff cannot attain. At the end of the first Act, however, hope remains for Willy as Biff tells him that he is going to seek a job from Oliver. Willy's dreams concerning Biff are awakened again:

WILLY: Like a young god. Hercules--something like that. And the sun, the sun all around him. Remember how he waved to me! Right up from the field, with the representatives of three colleges standing by! And the buyers I brought, and the cheers when he came out--Loman, Loman, Loman! God Almighty, he'll be great yet. A star like that, magnificent, can never really fade away! (Act I, p. 68)

Willy's twin failures as a father and as a husband come to the fore in the second Act. He is fired; Biff fails to get the job because he foolishly steals Oiver's pen. The memory scene with Biff and the Woman shows that Willy's failure as a husband also constitutes his ultimate failure to Biff. Biff's discovering of this wrong done to his mother haunts him the rest of his life. What is even more crucial is Biff's repudiation of Willy as his exemplar and his resulting loss of direction in life.

But the memory of Ben plays on Willy, and so he creates another illusion to counteract the failure of his previous one--he now identifies the quest for success with death as he thinks of the insurance Biff can obtain if he dies:

Willy: Carrots . . . quarter-inch apart. Rows . . . one-foot rows. (He measures it off.) One foot. (He puts down a package and measures off.) Beets. (He puts down another package and measures again.) Lettuce. (He reads the package, puts it down.) One foot--(He breaks off as Ben appears at the right and moves slowly down on him.) What a proposition, ts, ts. Terrific, terrific! Cause she's suffered, Ben, the woman has suffered. You understand me? A man can't go out the way he came in, Ben, a man has got to add up to something. You can't, you can't--(Ben moves toward him as though to interrupt.) You gotta consider, now. Don't answer so quick. Remember, it's a guaranteed twenty-thousand-dollar proposition. Now look, Ben, I want you to go through the ins and outs of this thing with me. I've got nobody to talk to Ben, and the woman has suffered, you hear me?
(Act II, pp. 126-127)

So Willy can see his death "like a diamond, shining in the dark, hard and rough, that I can pick up and touch in my hand. Not like-like an appointment!" Here, the memory of the past which centers on Ben becomes a present reality for Willy as he realizes that he can still follow the quest for success. From the illusion of the past he builds the illusion of the present. He dies with this heroic notion of himself. At the end he, not Biff, becomes the Apollo-Hercules figure which he identified earlier with the Biff of long ago. Yet he is unaware that, as he proudly acknowledges his stance in the sun, all around him are shouting, "Loman, Loman, Loman. . . ."

In Miller's play, the rock bottom of reality is being asserted. Willy's illusions merely serve to ruin him. And his death is not heroic, as he would have it, but a failure to see himself as he really is--"a dime a dozen," as Biff tells him:

BIFF: I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them! I'm one-dollar an hour, Willy! I tried seven states and couldn't raise it. A buck an hour! Do you gather my meaning? I'm not bringing home any prizes any more, and you're going to stop waiting for me to bring them home! (Act II, p. 132)

By the illusion of the play itself, memory within memory within memory, the illusive world of the past is asserted by Williams as part and parcel of the blood creativity of the artist's world. Shifting the scene from the artist to everyman, Miller's illusive play forces the issue with the illusions of man and shows what a tragedy they can lead to. His creative illusive inner world, as exemplified in the play, mocks the value of illusions and holds for the purity of grim reality.