

American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research (AJHSSR)

e-ISSN :2378-703X

Volume-5, Issue-7, pp-212-217

www.ajhssr.com

Research Paper

Open Access

Transitional Objects and Illusory Experiences in U.S. Modern Drama: A Study of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*

Abdullah Qasim Safi Al-Hadi¹

¹(Department of English, College of Education/The Islamic University, Iraq)

ABSTRACT: Lainer Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), one of the most celebrated dramatists and playwrights in the world of American dramaturgy, and D.W. Winnicott (1896-1971), one of the famous British moralists and psychoanalysts, delineate in urgent voice the existence of the intermediate, in-between area. They have utilized certain transitional objects either to emblemize definite points or to portray some perspectives on illusory experience and objective reality. This paper brings into focus the "glass menagerie," the descriptive title of Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), as a transitional object that has certain dramatic aspects of significant importance. By zeroing in on this specific object, I will attempt to bring about a conclusion that the psycho-moralist Donald Woods Winnicott's theory of "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena" in his *Playing and Reality* (1952-1971) and Tennessee Williams's practical theory of transitional (inanimate) characters in *The Glass Menagerie* are structurally and thematically complementary and affinitive. My contention is determined on the basis of some valuable passages from both works.

Keywords: external world, intermediate, internal world, transitional object, transitional phenomena

I. INTRODUCTION

Anyone, who is interested in literary studies or literary criticism, should have some knowledge about the association between literature and psychoanalysis theories. Both D.W. Winnicott and Tennessee Williams set forth in their works notable complementary and affinitive views concerning *intermediate* or *in-between space* and *object*. This intermediate possibility and truthfulness is situated neither within the personal self nor in the culture of things or the world of economic and political developments. D.W. Winnicott (2005) authenticates that "the area of individual development and experience seems to have been neglected while in literature nowadays most attention was focused on psychic reality, which is personal and inner" (p.xv). Such in-between experience, where the transitional object contributes, is reserved in life, "in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work" (p. 16). After such contribution, there has been constant involvement of Winnicott in diverse philosophical, religious, political domains, to mention a few, and intersubjective, moral and dialogical themes (Alford, 2000, pp. 235-159; Gerson, 2005, 107-126; Wilkin, 2006, pp. 12-18). Praglin (2016) finds an affinity between Winnicott's intermediate area and the theologian and socialist Martin Buber's doctrine of *das Zwischenmenschliche* in terms of influence on a variety of interdisciplinary fields (p. 1), while Sekkel (2016) finds Winnicott's "transitional phenomena" and Walter Benjamin's "similarities" principles are created for the same purpose, that is, our life (p. 86). Winnicott's "object relation theory" or "transitional objects and transitional phenomena" theory is a branch of psychoanalytic theory, studies not only the human relationship and development but also the importance and treatment of inanimate objects in the culture of things.

II. DISCUSSION

Tennessee Williams' most excellent one-act drama *The Glass Menagerie* (1944-45) portrays the life of an utterly depressed Southern family, deserted by the father, Mr. Wingfield, and now they dwell on the past and regretful time. This family lives from hand to mouth in the hard days of a disregarded society after the depression. Williams, through the narrator, Tom, calls his work a memory play as it is based on a reminiscence of the past and it explores complex psychological issues and the paramount importance of nonhuman objects in U.S. modernism. Tom, the narrator and a character, extremely unhappy, addresses the audience and furnishes them with the key particularities and content of the play:

The play is memory It is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic....

I am the narrator of the play, and also a character in it. The other characters are my mother, Amanda, my sister, Laura, and a gentleman caller who appears in the final scenes. He is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somewhat set apart from. But since I have a poet's weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long-delayed but always expected something that we lived for.

There is a fifth character in the play who doesn't appear This is our father who left us a long time ago ... (*The Glass Menagerie*, scene I, 22)

The Title of *The Glass Menagerie* denotes the importance of these glass animals as a significant central symbol in the play. It is a collection of tiny and fragile glass animals, Laura's favorite collection. Laura, the chief character in the play, describes the articles to Jim, the gentleman caller, as "[l]ittle articles of it, they're ornaments mostly! Most of them are little animals made of glass, the tiniest little animals in the world, Mother calls them a glass menagerie!" (scene vii, 82). These little sculpted ornaments suggest beauty, serenity and fragility. Laura is beautiful, but instead of associating and communicating with the outside objective world, she withdraws into her inner (subjective) world, the world of glass menagerie and ornaments. The ornaments are her first possession and she lives in an intermediate area between the subjective world and the objective world. Winnicott (2005) interestingly explains his major concern in his theory of "transitional phenomena," "I am concerned with the first possession, and with the intermediate area between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived" (p.4).

According to Laura, the glassy world, the world of make-believer, is real rather than imaginative. For her, the glass animals are not inanimate objects, but living objects having real spirits. The cold glass animals become warm whenever she touches them. Williams describes how Laura "is washing and polishing her collection of glass" (scene ii, 27) and later Laura tells Jim that "my glass collection takes up a good deal of time. Glass is something you have to take care of" (scene vii, 81). In fact, Laura is beautiful, delicate and shy but she is not able to be easily noticed by others and fairly judged in the culture of objects, therefore, she would not stop going on about and referring to her glass animals. This is more akin to the description used by Winnicott of a boy aged eleven who suffered from fear of separation:

...he is very self-conscious and easily goes red in the neck. He has a *number of teddy bears which to him are children*. No one dares to say that they are toys. He is *loyal to them, expends a great deal of affection over them, and makes trousers for them*, which involves careful sewing... he seems to get a sense of security from his family, which he mothers in this way. (2005, p.25, emphasis added)

According to Laura, unicorns like light and feel lonely, and all other horses like to go to the cinema and jewelry boxes every night. Laura's glass menagerie is symbolic of her loneliness and isolation, and her illusory experience is generated and related to our illusory experience. Whenever Laura faces lived objective reality, she seems to be down in the mouth and she fails the tough challenge. The portrayal this drama generates, seems to correspond to the truth. *The Glass Menagerie* is a biographical play and it has many biographical touches related to Williams' own life and direct experience. It is a memory story of his very childhood and his early life together with his family. Laura's role identifies with Williams' sister Rose; Laura's collection of glass animals is consistent with Rose's toys; Williams' childhood relationship with Rose is considered an emotional bond that connects Laura and her brother Tom in the play; and finally, Williams' mother is identified with Laura's mother, Amanda Wingfield in the play. Williams is well identified with Tom the narrator and character. Both Williams the dramatist and Tom the character and narrator belong to the world of objective reality. C. Bigsly (2004) writes that,

It was the context for a play having to do with the desperate strategies developed by those whose options have run out. Tom, a writer, returns in a memory to a family he had destroyed in order to claim his freedom to write ... Tom, as a narrator, stands outside the world of his family literally and figuratively. (p.38)

The glass menagerie symbolizes the loneliness and separation that Laura experiences. Amanda is a southern belle and a member in the organization of D.A.R (Daughters of the American Revolution). The greatness of her past in Mississippi and the shabbiness of her life in St. Louis, made her devoting her life to work. The work-life balance of Amanda is hardly good as job dissatisfaction and personal life dissatisfaction are emphasized. In another language, Amanda found it difficult to strike the balance between being mother and

being laborer. Thus, the glass menagerie represent isolation and loneliness and they are things that Laura falls back on as her mother could not or did not take her job as a mother very seriously. Amanda has spent most of her born days at work since it is unquestionably difficult for a family to make ends meet with two children and one parent, therefore, Laura was prone to anxiety.

Joven(1966), analyzing the character of Amanda, writes that "[s]he is presented as out of touch with reality; she is flighty, and a source of embarrassment to her children"(p.53). Moreover, Amanda is unfit to provide security for her Laura, but a burden to her (Griffin, 1995, p.61). Laura was dealing with adaptation and the question of being taken to care, attempting to deny neglect and lack of good-enough mother by her use of the glass menagerie.

Interestingly and importantly, this is very similar to Winnicott's lack of "good enough mothering" and instance of a boy who was "dealing with a fear of separation, attempting to deny separation by his use of string" (Winnicott, 2005, p.23). Moreover, although Amanda is a well-educated and intellectual woman, she fails to be a good-enough mother for her daughter. Likewise, Winnicott suggests in his theorizing on illusory experience that the mother "makes no active adaptation" that "gradually lessens," and success in young care "depends on the fact of devotion, not on cleverness or intellectual enlightenment" (p.14). Therefore, the intellectual and well-educated mother Amanda does not meet the physical, cultural, social, economic and spiritual needs of Laura.

For Hirsch (1979), Williams was highly autobiographical and took a keen interest in the past (p.36); therefore, he interpolated autobiographical aspects into the structure and theme of his play. For Williams, there is no possibility to retrieve the lost past, even if you flog yourself to death. Besides past, the future is rather gloomy and worse than expected (Bigsby, 2004, p.32). What Amanda expected for Laura's future such as her relationship with Jim and work at school has gone astray. She is very passive. Even the meeting between Laura and Jim was truly a joint effort, Amanda, Tom and Jim made a concerted effort to establish the cause of this fruitless meeting. The downside or one of the worst-case scenarios of not good-enough mother is a terrible dilemma like that of Laura. This is part of the structure and theme of *The Glass Menagerie*, that is, illusion and reality.

The most important symbolic transitional object among the glass animals is the unicorn. It is most delicate and the dearest to Laura. Laura warns Jim to be very careful in touching this specific thirteen-year old glass animal, "Oh, be careful - if you breathe it break!" (scene vii, 81). There is a great similarity between Laura and the unicorn in terms of fragility, beauty and delicacy, both are tender and overdiligent. Ali (2011) argues that illusory objects in *The Glass Menagerie* are "a kind of transitional happiness for those characters" and shelter for their lives (p.49). In discussing the transitional phenomena, Winnicott (2005) writes that the transitional object "goes on being important. The parents get to know its value and carry it around when traveling." The mother does not wash it and "lets it get dirty and even smelly" because she surely well knows that "by washing it she introduces a break in continuity" in the child's experience, "a break that may destroy the meaning and value of the object" to the child (p.5). There is clear sign in Williams' play that the unicorn has become a symbol of Laura's inner subjective world. The single horn in the unicorn's forehead made it different and unique, as Laura points out to Jim, "[haven't] you noticed the single horn on his forehead?" (scene vii, 82). Both the unicorn with single horn and Laura who is a crippled girl physically and spiritually are unique and different. Symbolically and transitionally, the unicorn represents Laura's own self. There is a world of difference between Laura's life and other people's life. She, like the unicorn, does not air her grievances about being lonesome or unique and, like Laura, the unicorn is the most delicate of all the animals in the collection (James, et al. 1989, p.596).

By utilizing the object of the unicorn, Williams represents sides of Laura's character by suggesting more than stating or describing. The most important scene in the play is when Jim, while kisses and dances with Laura and he unintentionally breaks the horn of the unicorn. The scene represents Jim's abortive attempt to cure Laura's loneliness and to transfer her from her idealized world to the external world by promising her the earth, but his plan does not come off, and it's time he faced up to the facts. At first, there is a flurry of activity and excitement, a flicker of emotion and interest, a glimmer of hope for the future. But then unfortunately, Jim's determined effort to save Laura's tense situation ends with a lull in the conversation, more than a touch of sadness, and there isn't even a stroke of luck. After Jim offered Laura all his most abject apology for the trouble he caused, she neither blames him for damaging the unicorn nor stops worshipping her collection, especially the unicorn, but she reacts by saying "Horn! It doesn't matter. Maybe it's a blessing in disguise." Laura did not want to comment on this situation. She has not remonstrated with Jim or reduced him to tears with fault-finding, but says "I'll just imagine he had an operation." The transitional object was removed so it does not look so strange and "Now he will feel more at home with the other horses, the ones who don't have horns...." (scene vii, 85). The breaking of the horn represents only the short-term change in Laura's life. Without the horn, the unicorn is no

longer considered abnormal and strange to Laura among other glass objects. Laura seems to get security from her imaginative family, the glass menagerie. However, it makes no sense to ask Laura about the reason for this as it's utterly impossible to account for such behavior.

Such experience will be such a formidable challenge and Laura's experience is an epitome of and tally with many points made in the theory of *transitional object and transitional phenomena* that Winnicott has proposed. Winnicott(2005) writes that,

The transitional object and the transitional phenomena start each human being off with what will always be important for them, i.e. a neutral area of experience which will not be challenged. Of the transitional object it can be said that it is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never ask the question: 'Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?' The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated. (p.17)

The question of inanimate(transitional) objects or characters brings me to my next point: the power of symbolism. Symbolically speaking, the unicorn and its broken horn is used by the dramatist to represent Jim's attempt to cure and reform inside Laura's broken and crippled self, to build up in her a self-confidence instead of shyness. But he has already destroyed all what he has built inside. In another language, in order to cure Laura, Jim set the wheels in motions by breaking the unicorn's horn. He hasn't broken her unicorn only, but also her heart. Because the unicorn represents likewise hopes and devotion that Laura could not find in her mother and she thinks now can find them in Jim, the breaking of the unicorn is a breaking of her inner(subjective) world (hopes, devotion, adaptation, good-enough family, et cetera), and a reform of the external world. Therefore, the transitional object (the unicorn) is neither an internal object nor an external one: it is a transitional object, its existence and aliveness determine the meaning of the internal object, and it becomes meaningless when it is no longer having meaning to the child. Taking issue with Melanie Klein's theory of the "internal object" (a mental and psychological concept) and external object, Winnicott (2005) writes that "The transitional object is not an internal object" but a "possession. Yet it is not ... an external object either" (p.13). Thus, transitional objects do not belong to the inner world, yet they do not belong to the outer world either. Instead, they belong in an intermediate area between the two worlds, the inner and the external. It is worthwhile, however, to point out that the transitional object still stands for both worlds.

Winnicott's points in his theory of "transitional objects and transitional phenomena" accordingly concur with most of Williams's views that can be deduced from *Glass Menagerie*. Laura gives Jim the unicorn as a souvenir to take care of it because her hopes of devotion and adaptation have gone with it. The unicorn has become meaningless because it is no longer peculiar like her and the other glass animals and now it is more suitable for Jim as a representative of the real or external or objective world. So the transitional object is neither internal object nor external object but it can denote both worlds, the internal and external, the subjective and the objective. Within the intermediate area of experiencing as a transitional phenomena, between the inside and outside ideas theorized by Winnicott in the 1950s and remodified later and as already practiced by Tennessee Williams in 1940s, the transitional objects are not part of the young's body or inner reality yet they are not fully conceived as part of external reality. The transitional object is on the border between the inner and external realities and it stands for both realities but does not belong to them. It may denote inside Laura and outside Laura simultaneously without becoming part of either. In healthy experiences, the transitional object does not require mourning or repression and it's not allowed to become part of the other or part of the self.

The transitional objects and transitional phenomena, in both prose theory (Winnicott) and drama (Williams), belong to the world of illusion. Illusion is undoubtedly an absolutely vital term in the thematic and symbolic organization of *Glass Menagerie* and the framework of Winnicott's theory, which is at the basis of initiation of experience. In the play *Glass Menagerie*, the narrator Tom Wingfield, Laura's brother, "addresses the audience" saying "[h]e gives you illusion that has the appearance of the truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion (scene i, 21). Illusions are deceptions and misinterpretation of reality that must be avoided, but it's almost utterly impossible for children or even adults in the contexts of art and religion to avoid. (Pishkar, 2000) writes that "Illusions are deceptions, misinterpretations of facts, and so would appear to be things to avoid, to be rid of; yet at the same time it is impossible for human beings to escape them" (p.643). For Winnicott (2005), the intermediate area of experience "constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience, and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belong to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work (p.19). Although Winnicott is concerned with patterns set in infancy, he purposely leaves room for wide variations: he suggests the patterns begin to show at about four to twelve months, may continue to childhood, or reappear at a later age. One of his case studies is a boy aged seven years,

another case study is a child aged eleven, and finally suggests the patterns may develop into sexuality and a perversion.

The intermediate situation meant by Winnicott can be understood through analyzing Laura's state between her ability and her inability to recognize and accept reality offered by Jim. Jim broke the unicorn by touching it and broke Laura's heart by telling her of his new love, and Laura seemed to be down in the dumps. On the one hand, the unicorn represents Laura who feels disappointed and about to retreat to her illusory world—it represents the inner world, and on the other hand, it represents Jim because after losing its horn it became usual and ordinary like Jim and, therefore, Laura gives it to Jim to take it into lived objective reality—it now represents the external world. Therefore, the unicorn is a very clear instance of the transitional object and Laura is challenged by illusory experience and her situation is an epitome of Winnicott's transitional phenomena.

One of the important themes of *The Glass Menagerie* is the power of love. Love not only can make things real, but it can change the entire world. When Jim reveals that he and Betty, his new girlfriend, hit it off immediately and got on like a house on fire, he says to Laura that "[t]he power of love is pretty tremendous! Love is something changes the whole world, Laura!" (scenevii, 88). Likewise, Laura's love for her glass animals is powerful to the extent it made them real and created a new world for her, an imaginary world.

Williams's play is devoted mostly to Laura. The title *The Glass Menagerie* refers to her and she is the central character in the play. When it comes to symbolism, the most significant symbol in the play is the glass menagerie, the inhabitants of Laura's illusory world. The delicate, beautiful and fragile unicorn stands for Laura herself. Its horn may refer to Laura's shyness and keeping to herself all the time in her world of make-believer. Laura's retreat to a dark corner of the stage among her special living objects the glass menagerie, is a clear indication of her already departure from the objectively perceived world. After the unicorn's horn is broken, she gives it to Jim and decides to withdraw forever from the world of normality and darkness to her own unusual and idealized world. She prefers living among her family, the glass animals, a fact which may develop into sexual adaptation and perversion. When Winnicott tries to conclude about his chosen story of a boy aged eleven who suffered from separation, he writes that "[i]t is not difficult to guess, therefore, that he has a material identification based on his own insecurity in relation to his mother, and this could develop into homosexuality. In the same way the pre-occupation with string could develop into a perversion" (2005, p.25). This indicates that Winnicott's theory is not concerned with infants and children only, but it may be related to the age of adolescence and further.

III. CONCLUSION

As an artistic and literary form, drama depends not only on words but also on characters to develop the action and communicate the themes of the dramatist. In addition to animate characters, there are also inanimate characters or transitional objects which have certain significance on the stage and through which the dramatist triggers different themes and meanings. If there is a reason why these transitional inanimate objects are used in drama, it is because they share certain significance with the animate characters in communicating the themes and meanings. In his *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams employs nonhuman transitional characters to provide side of Laura's character. In fact, Williams's *Glass Menagerie* is a practical theory of transitional objects and transitional phenomena proposed by Winnicott later, and both Winnicott's prose theory and Williams's drama are psychological approaches that can be subsumed under one heading. Therefore, Winnicott's "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena" complements Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*.

REFERENCES

- [1] Winnicott, D. W., *Playing and Reality*. Edited with Preface by F. Robert Rodman. (New York: North Carolina State University, 2005).
- [2] Alford, C. Fred, Levinas and Winnicott: Motherhood and Responsibility, *American Imago* 57(3), 2000, 235-259.
- [3] Gerson, Gal, "Individuality, Deliberation and Welfare in Donald Winnicott," *History of the Human Sciences* 18(1), 2005, 107-126, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0952695105051128>
- [4] Wilkin, P., In Search of the True Self: A Clinical journey Through the Vale of Soul-Making, *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 13(1), 2006, 12-18.
- [5] Praglin, Laura. The Nature of the "In-Between" in D.W. Winnicott's Concept of Transitional Space and in Martin Buber's *das Zwischenmenschliche*, *Universitat*, 2(2), 2006, 1-9. https://universitas.uni.edu/archive/fall06/pdf/art_praglin.pdf

- [6] Sekkel, Marie Claire, The play and the invention of the world in Walter Benjamin and Donald Winnicott, *Psicologia USP*, 27(1), 2016, 86-95. <https://www.scielo.br/j/psusp/a/TgRvPjwXzMVm3yyQZCP9Tn/?format=pdf&lang=en>
- [7] Williams, Tennessee, *The Glass Menagerie*. Edited with Introduction by Robert Bray. (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1999).
- [8] Bigsby, C.W.E., *Modern American Drama (1945 – 2000)*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- [9] Nilda G. Joven, in Illusion Verses Reality in *The Glass Menagerie*. in *Illusion and Reality in Tennessee Williams*. Nilda G. Joven (ED.), Diliman Review, 1966, 52- 60.
- [10] Griffin, Alice, The Character of Amanda Wingfield, in *Understanding Tennessee Williams*. Alice Griffin (ED.), 1995, 61-70.
- [11] foster Hirsch, *A Portrait of the Artist: The Plays of Tennessee Williams*. (London: Kennikat Press, 1979).
- [12] Ghada Hasan Ali, Illusion as a Shelter in Life in Tennessee Williams' Play *The Glass Menagerie*, *Journal of Al-Ma'moon University College*, 18 (1), 2011, 37-52. <https://www.iasj.net/iasj/download/61f07fe709cf5f6b>
- [13] James, Miller E. and Jr. Kerry M., Wood and Carlota Cardenas de Dwyer. *The United States in Literature*. (New Jersey: Scott, Foresman, 1989).
- [14] Pishkar, Kian, *A Reader's Guide to English Literature*. (Tehran: Sib-e Sorkh, 2000).